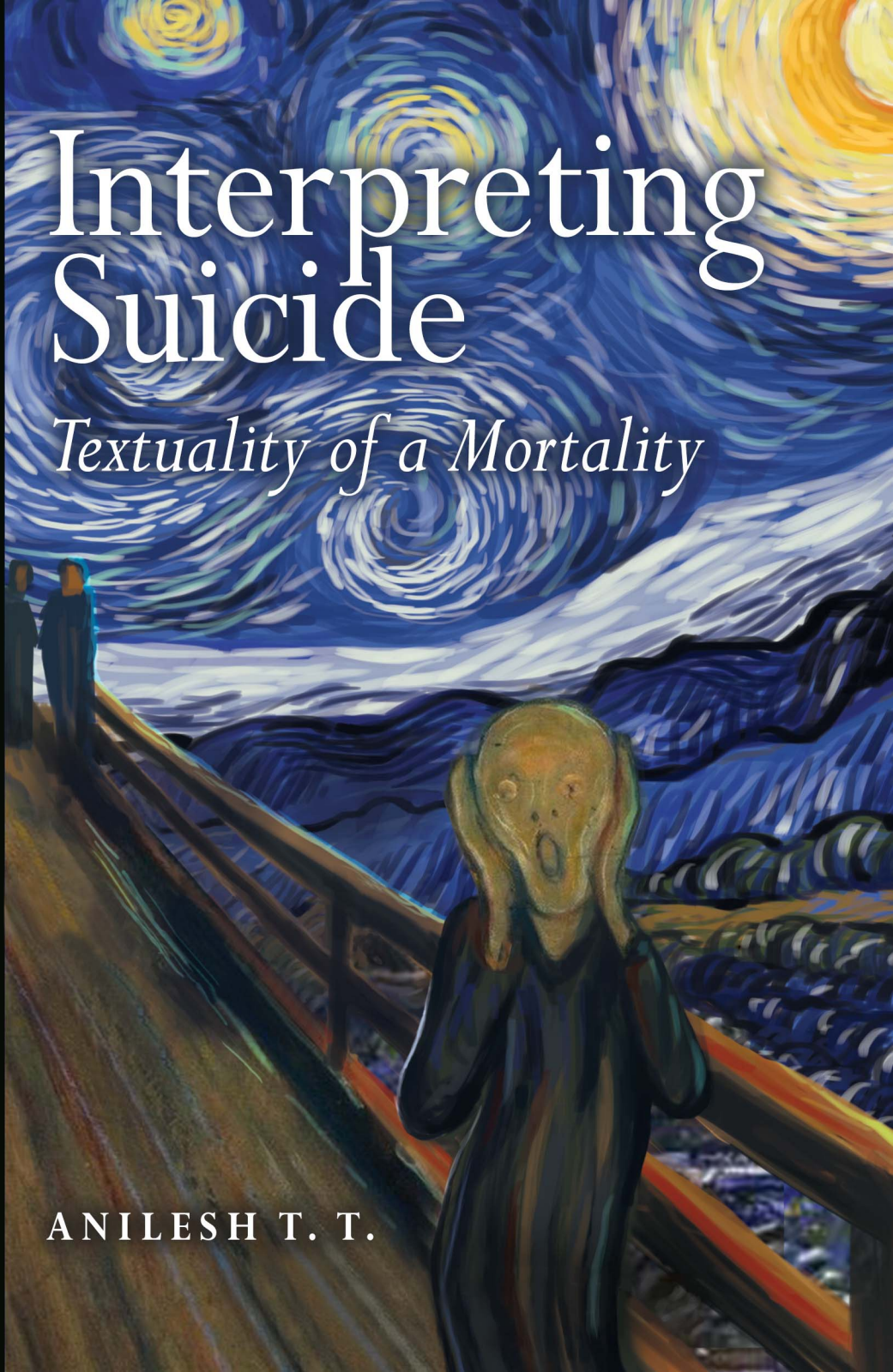
Interpreting Suicide

Textuality of a Mortality



ANILESH T. T.

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Interpreting Suicide:

Textuality of a Mortality

By

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Dedicated to the dignity of wilful deaths.

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PREFACE

Suicide is ubiquitously understood as one of the most enigmatic gestures of life that makes any attempt to decipher it a futility. Still, as an undefeatable race, we the humans, like the curious Jonathan Harker who ventured out to the prohibited chamber in Dracula castle and the prototypical Eve who dared to be seduced to the taste of the forbidden fig fruit, have never spared an opportunity to play with the enigmas; so has been our encounters and engagements with this primordial act of self-annihilation. Since the first man on the earth, or specifically, since man has developed a living-reflecting mind, he/she has had lethal rendezvous with suicide and its allies. Doubtless, suicide has never been a monolithic mortality. It is not just dying, and as Karl Menninger has wisely observed it is "a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed." Such sincere inquiries into suicide remind us of one fundamental aspect that a reading of suicide is perhaps worthier than just committing it. Holding such a critical perspective, this book was germinated and aspires to be a scholarly endeavor to analyse the complexity of suicide.

Personally, what led me to this intellectual pursuit is an existential perturbance what is known as Existential Angst in the philosopher's glossary which I used to experience in my veins since my childhood days. The occasional all of a sudden realization of the inner vacuum would take the adolescent me to a spontaneous urge to get terminated for apparently no material reason. Though I was not 'committed' to suicide except in such moments of existential anguish, I found many people both in life and literature who happened to kill themselves for various self-proclaimed reasons. There I met Cleopatra, who translated death from the fangs of a mortal asp; Ophilia, who drowned herself in both the water of the brook and the embarrassing lovelessness of the great Shakespearean procrastinator; Anna Karenina who jumped before the rail wagon where she first met love in Alexei Vronsky's eyes; and Seymour Glass who shot himself at the moment of realization that it was none other than himself the existentially overfed banana fish, and the many more in literature. I also met Zeno, the founder of the stoic ideal of body mortification who killed himself by wilfully stopping his breath; Virginia Woolf, who fathomed the depth of the river Ouse with her life; Yukio Mishima, who ritualized his death through

a traditional Seppuku; and Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who found in death an art that resembled a sculpturing of mental abyss. Still there were self-annihilations more dramatic than a drama and more fictitious than a fiction in real life that were waiting for me to be witnessed: the death of the rich and the poor, the elite and the subaltern, the socially marked and the culturally devoiced. A plethora of such suicides led me to initiate a personal, still a systematic, philosophical investigation into the phenomenon.

The first chapter of this book intends to offer a more conceptual survey than a historical or chronological development of the primeval act of suicide. Though it proves itself a near impossibility to find the real roots of the act of suicide, it is possible to locate the philosophical attempts that tried to decode the fatal gesture. In this regard, this chapter is an intellectual endeavor to locate the cultures, religions, and philosophical and psychological schools that found in suicide a topic worth-discussing. It also throws a glimpse into the thinkers and writers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Albert Camus and Emile Durkheim who have committed themselves in understanding suicide The second chapter functions as the theoretical framework of the perspective from which suicide is read in this book. As the sub-title suggests, what is attempted in the study is to see the act of suicide as Text. Since the concept of Text is one the most problematical ones in contemporary theory, attempts have been made to explain the definitions offered to Text by the trailblazing theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Stanley Fish, and Stephen Greenblatt. Since undoubtedly they differ in their understandings about Text at several points, this chapter focusses on the analogous theoretical arguments they carry in their definitions of Text. This chapter also informs the reader in what sense the term Text is defined and applied as a framework in the analyses made in the book. Consequently, the Text of the writer is more or less a conglomeration of chosen points of definitions taken from similar or disparate ideas of Text. The third chapter consists of the studies of two literary characters. The first one is Jocasta, the ill-fated mother/wife of Oedipus whose story is mentioned in Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Rex*. This analysis attempts to disclose the gaps existing in the linear readings done on Jocasta, and to unveil the unnoticed and unrevealed facets of Jocasta's personality. The second case in this chapter is a re-reading of Seymour Glass, the character who was immortalised in the fiction of J.D.Salinger. This reading tries to see a Seymour who is not fragmented by literary principles. The fourth chapter deals with the suicides of two writers, Nanditha and Shalvy. Nanditha is the young poetess committed suicide in 1990 in Kerala. She can be seen as interpreted largely with the help of her biographical details. In other words,

her poems, which were published posthumously were studied on the basis of the actual events in her life. My attempt here is to free Nanditha from the critical confinements, and read her suicide as Text, a methodological field which does not hold any confinement. For the purpose, I re-analyse a generally unnoticed poem of Nanditha from a different perspective. Shalvy was an equally talented poet in Malayalam Literature who had several similarities with Nanditha, and many of his poems were also published posthumously. Shalvy's poems, which were largely personal and confessional in nature, were not given due importance. They were suffused with suicidal imagery, and he can be seen admitting his lifelong preoccupation with suicide in the 'pre' and 'post' notes attached to them. But, it can be seen that Shalvy's suicide was read on the basis of the actual events in his life. My attempt, in this study is to bring out Shalvy's suicidal inclination concealed behind and between his lines. The final case analysed in the fifth chapter has two parts which, in a sense, are related to each other. If the first part is an analysis based on the disproportionate increase in the rate of the suicide of the subaltern in Kerala, the second is a psycho-cultural analysis of the suicide of a particular person, a girl who belongs to the marginalised group in Kerala. In this case, the suicide is seen as a cultural text. The study functions on the theoretical presupposition that one's identity is a cultural construct, and each individual has multiple identities. It discloses how the generally unnoticed or intentionally quietened psycho-cultural reasons work as potential driving forces of suicide. It also tries to explain how the subaltern re-writes the social/cultural text of suicide.

As the study gets published in the book form, I am grateful to a few individuals: Prof. Prasantha Kumar, my mentor and a scholar par excellence in Literary Studies who was kind enough to write a Foreword to this book; Dr. (late) Sindhu Menon who was my Research Supervisor in M.Phil programme, and my parents who stood fast for the successful completion of my studies and research. I have thanks with love to Mr. Sreejesh, my artist student and friend who did the profound cover design of the book. I am very much thankful to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their professionalism and exceptional author-friendly system of publication that materialized this book. I gratefully remember Mr. James Britton who did the exemplary proof reading for my book.

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FOREWORD

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Anilesh's book *Interpreting Suicide: Textuality of a Mortality* is an enlightening reading of suicide as a mode of representation with five case studies on suicide. In the contemporary sense, text is anything that can be interpreted or critiqued. In other words, text is a product of discursive practice representing the relation between subjectivity and ideology or power and knowledge. The act of suicide is a product of consummate desire like any finished work of art. It expresses the self or subject position of the suicide at a point of crisis of his life. A person commits suicide when he thinks that the pain of life is greater than the pain of death. The suicide has thus a justification for his self destructive act. The case studies of two poets are interesting anecdotes for psychoanalytical studies: one is the case of an amateur poet, Nanditha, and the other is that of a daring publisher and poet, Shalvy. The suicide of the former can be connected to her poetic process constrained by marginality while the suicide of the latter can be related to his financially unsuccessful career as a publisher. Anilesh has successfully connected these actual suicides in recent Kerala history with two representations of suicide in literature: suicides of Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* and Seymour Glass in Salinger's short fiction. He has also enquired into the suicide of a subaltern girl as a case study of increasing instances of suicide among the marginalized of the marginalized. He has proved that whether in life or art, suicide is a product of textual practice subject to hermeneutic interrogation.

Suicide has remained an elusive phenomenon since the beginning of civilization. Despite the several psychoanalytical explanations about suicide, there is certain mystique about the causes and motives of suicide. The act of suicide cannot be simply dismissed as an act of self destruction. The Russian revolutionary and anarchist Mikhail Bakunin remarks that "the passion for destruction is also a creative passion." It is in this context that his biography by Mark Leier is titled *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. Leier

wants to negate the popular contention that suicide is a destructive passion. Suicides have justification for their act of self destruction. The protagonist of the film *Elvira Madigan* (1967) argues that suicide is a way of thwarting outside forces that are making living impossible. The suicides of the confessional poets point to this fact. There is an element of silent heroism in the dark glory of their apparently dreadful end. John Berryman jumped into the frozen Minneapolis River. Anne Sexton succumbed to the ever persisting temptation of death by carbon monoxide poisoning in her red Limousine. Sylvia Plath gave into the irresistible fascination to death through LPG poisoning following René Crevel's description of perfect death in *Détours*. Their apparent disinterestedness in life was matched by the mysterious methods shrouding their suicide. Robert Phillips argues that their self destructive urge was the inevitable outcome of their creative passion which consummated in what may be termed extremist poetry or what C.D. Lewis phrased "poetolatry," a queer combination of poetry, reality and tragedy. Their suicides seem to justify Albert Camus's remark that the reason for living is also a reason for dying. Nanditha's suicide is a case which can be compared to the suicide of some of the confessional poets, though it has not received the hype of a cult.

Extensive research has been carried out on the socio-psychology of suicide. Suicide arises from the character of an individual and depends on his perception of life and the world. But the imminent cause of suicide is the real or imaginary misfortunes of the victim which often sound odd and incredible or even irrational to the observers. Most suicides are committed in a passionate state as the self destructive impulses cease the victim abruptly like the violent cries of children. Suicide is rooted in the pseudo-civilization which makes it impossible for the modern man to carry out the struggle for existence. Lack of support or hope in a favourable future accelerates the suicide impulses. Every suicide strives to end life in the quickest way possible. The motive of suicide is closely related to the choice of means. The argument that the primitives showed no tendency to suicide makes it a malady inherent in modern civilization. Suicides are bloody sacrifices of the civilizing process, which Thomas G. Masaryk called "Kultur-Kampf." Shalvy was a minor but remarkable publisher whose business was circumscribed the culture vultures in the field. His business has impeded his creativity as a poet. It seems that his identity as a publisher creates a tension with his identity as a poet. Though this tension generally becomes artistically productive, it has proved to be unproductive and fatal in his career. His suicide was a self sacrifice made for a cause in a materialistic world.

Coleridge's visions of life-in-death and death-in-life have been used as a poetic idiom and a symbol of modern civilization. Modern man is in a Catch 22 situation struggling between survival and suicide. Self-centredness alienates him from his self. He simply survives and no longer lives. Survival is a kind of partial suicide where the individual has lost his humaneness. Suicide is a flight from complete existence into death whereas survival is a flight away from death. In this context, Benjamin B. Wolman and Herber H. Krauss argue that every suicide or attempted suicide is preceded by an existential partial suicide. Therefore, survival is a state of partial existence before suicide. Wolman and Krauss even call survival "pre-suicidal syndrome." A reduction of human possibilities results in the pre-suicidal syndrome. The fifth case of the unnamed marginalized girl is driven by her inability to lead a dignified life due to hostile human conditions. Though Kerala is socially and educationally progressive, residues of caste discrimination is conspicuous in the social life of Kerala. The subalterns are denied human dignity and treated as subhuman species at least in some cases.

Freud explained that suicide is the outcome of the cumulative frustrations of a lifestyle resulting from the coupling of pathological self love and desire for unattainable aspirations. The unconscious is the source of *eros* (life instinct) and *thanatos* (death instinct) on the one hand and creativity and neurosis on the other. According to Wolman and Krauss, in a suicide, *thanatos* predominates and gains control over *eros* . But suicide is a multiplay determined by the interactions of several motives of which ego-splitting and identifications are the dominant. The death instinct of the victim provides a source of energy required for the suicide. According to Edwin S. Shneidman, the aggressive death instinct is directed outwards and tormenting destructive instinct is directed inwards, resulting in the splitting of the ego . The intrinsic violence finally gets manifested in the violent self destruction. Traumatic neurosis and psychosis also become causes of suicide. The former case involves continuous re-enactment of the unconscious conflicts emerging from a traumatic situation where images of death condition the self. The feeling that one's part of the self has died and that one has killed a person in a symbolic way are tortuous to the self. Such experiences, according to Wolman and Krauss, are related to transgression and guilt and result in ambivalent feelings like hatred, self loathing and death wish. Thus, unresolved, ambivalent emotions lead to suicide.

The suicide of Jocasta is motivated by guilt consciousness. In fact Oedipus and Jocasta constitute the two halves of the confessant self. Oedipus represents that part of the self which wants to reveal more even when the

revelation is fatal. But Jocasta represents the other part of the self which wants to inhibit fatalistic revelations. In the story, when Tiresias revealed the reason for the drought and famine of Thebes, Jocasta by intuition that Oedipus could be the reason and she tried to prevent further revelations. When Oedipus insisted on to reveal more, Tiresias revealed the fatal truth step by step. Jocasta committed suicide as she feared that she would turn out to be an outcast for her participation in incest. Tiresias's revelation shattered her relations with Oedipus and her other children. When Oedipus's identity was revealed, she was overpowered by many conflicting ambivalent emotions which motivated her to kill herself.

Death is a possible outcome of a suicidal crisis which expresses in a desperate and dangerous way one's feelings about one's self, though in ambiguous terms like oscillation between life and death. According to Schneidman, the suicide courts disaster in the situation without feeling that death is possible at all. This is interpreted as an urge to rediscover oneself through death. The suicide has a sense of guilt which denies him any right to life and creates a feeling that he is destined to have a dead life. According to Wolman and Kraus, the suicide pursues a desire for a non-being and achieves a state of death-in-life. People suffering from dysmutual disorders are prone to suicide. They are unable to live with people on a rational, mutual level. They cultivate a feeling that no one can be trusted and find life worthless to pursue. They find that loss by betrayal is more unbearable than loss by death. According to Wolman and Krauss, desertion and betrayal seriously damage the self of such individuals. Loneliness and ennui are unenviable states of existence for them. Self destructive tendency contains a high degree of self extinction. The extreme form of self destructive act need not be negative. It is a way out of conflict and crisis. It has a residual fulfilment and gratification. Suicide is often pursued as a means to defeat the external forces that make dignified living impossible.

The role of society is crucial in driving individuals to suicide. Émile Durkheim in his masterpiece *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* suggests that suicide is a consequence of oppressive social structure. He classifies suicide under four heads: egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. The first category, egoistic suicide, is the kind of self destruction pursued by persons who fail to live up to social norms and expectations as in the case of Shalvy who considered book publishing as a cultural practice rather than a business. The third category, anomic suicide needs some explanation in the context of suicide of creative writers like Nanditha. Raoul Naroll proposes "thwarting-disorientation theory" to explain the causes of altruistic suicide. According to him, persons with weakened, threatened or broken social

relations, and persons with domestic unrest or marital problems are easily prone to suicide. When interpersonal relations become difficult or impossible, the consequent alienation and isolation give into self destructive urges. In the case of Seymour Glass, there is a discrepancy between social norms/expectations and one's practice of the same. Self-profit motive is attributed to anomic suicide. According to Durkheim, suicidogenic situation is produced by the interaction among ambivalent attitudes, high goal-means discrepancy, loneliness and inadequate perception of the immediate condition which is inescapable. Persons who fail to overcome the situation end up in suicide. Jocasta's case is an example of fatalistic suicide where chance is also an important factor.

Seymour Glass, a character in J.D. Salinger's short fiction, appears as a problematic husband in the conversation between his wife and her mother. He is alienated from his wife's family and has failed to cultivate sound social relations in life. But he appears as friendly and innocent to his children. He seems to undergo an infantile regression to reach the innocence of his childhood. He disrobes himself before his daughter Sybil and kisses her feet but he fails to maintain a healthy sexual relation with his wife Muriel. He used to tell "banana stories" to his daughter which is intrinsically phallic whereas he keeps a communication gap with his wife. Thus, he appears as two different selves: a social outcast in the adult world and friendly and innocent in the children's world. His social relations become dysfunctional. Since he has no social anchorage, he is driven to suicide. The suicide of the subaltern girl is the tragedy of an unsustainable society. Society often fails to support individuals who struggle with life. Society's help is often limited in rhetoric rather than in concrete terms. The suicides in subalterns are actually the results of deficient and miserable living conditions. The attribution of cultural parameters and hierarchical structure to such suicides is irrational. Moreover, the gender variable and the Harlequin syndrome in the case of the girl are unfounded.

Creative process is at once a quest and an experience. Freud thought that conflict is the source of creativity. But Jung saw that creativity is the absolute antithesis of a reaction which eludes human understanding. Kierkegaard found suffering as a necessary consequence of creative process. Karl Shapiro found an inverse relation between sensitivity of the artist and pain he undergoes: the greater the sensitivity, the lower the threshold of pain and suffering. As an exceptionally sensitive person, a creative artist is more egoistic; he feels more, more personally and more painfully. Lynne Salop illustrates this argument in the interconnectedness of the miserable life and fatal creativity of Sylvia Plath. She argues that an

artist's creativity is likely to harm some other activities of the mind. Freud, Jung and Kubie established an intricate relation between the creative and neurotic processes. The symbolic creative process correlates emotional references to concrete meanings. Experiences of the artist are concretized into images expressing precise and effective messages. An artist or a writer is responsible for the action of his created characters. Sartre argues that the artist as a creator commits himself to the fearful adventure of facing the dangers risked by his creatures. Adler finds that the creative process involves a set of bipolar activities. This results from a tension between the self-unfolding and self-effacing poles in terms of progress and repression, harmony and disharmony, serenity and anxiety. The tension is resolved through the creative output resulting in psychological relief. Therefore, creativity acts as a catharsis for emotional disturbances of the artist. Salop finds such a cathartic effect in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Nanditha's poetic output need be studied in this context, though as "an inheritor of unfulfilled renown."

Camus observes that absurdity of life demands that death and art cannot transcend the absurd. He states in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that suicide is an act shaped within the silence of the heart as a great work of art is. Camus finds absurdity as a sense of being nothing. In the context of radical reality, art matters less than violation. When art becomes destructive or self defeating, suicide becomes a matter of choice for the artist. It is the external manifestation of an inward tumult. Camus developed his concept of absurdity in the post world war period marked as the most chaotic period in history. The chaotic nature of the art is also matched by the chaotic behaviour of artists. In the case of many artists, suicide becomes the ultimate work of art. The objective of this kind of art is to shock and to warn the readers. Art survives the artist despite the chaos that encircles both the art and the artist. The chaotic and destructive nature of art demands a perpetual and restless urge to explore, to experiment, to innovate and to destroy accepted styles and to create new ones. Art changes when the forms available are no longer adequate for expression. Every innovation in art is followed by an inward shift which results in an inward response and sometimes an inward disaster. The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton states that a "psychic numbing" seizes the artist on his encounter with death. The post war period witnessed large scale death everywhere. This renders death indifferent, impersonal, inevitable and meaningless. This makes an unprecedented demand on the artist to find a new language to express the element of self destruction, a new medium to represent the dimension of unnatural, premature death. This new language maybe called the language

of mourning and art takes the cathartic function of mourning. The poetry of Nanditha and Shalvy are examples of poetry of mourning.

Some suicides are expressive tragedies that shock and warn the society. They serve the cathartic function of a tragedy. As Coleridge states in "The Rime of Ancient Mariner," tragedy makes us sadder but wiser: "A sadder but wiser man/He rose the morrow mourn". Kafka stated in his letter to Oscar Pollack: "The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation – a book should serve as the axe for the frozen sea within us." He means that a great work of art moves us by making us experience the loss and pain associated with life; they prepare us for a tragedy, which according to D.H. Lawrence, is like a kick at misery. As a comic relief in Shakespeare, suicides in society prepare the living to live a healthy life.

Though Freud placed death instinct beyond the pleasure principle, he believed that it is pleasurable. This compels the artist to assume the role of a scapegoat. He risks life and explores his vulnerability in his attempt to evolve a language of mourning. Some great works of art or literature are metaphoric expressions of suicide. Kafka committed artistic suicide when tuberculosis failed to deliver him natural death. Boris Pasternak wrote an epigraph to the successful suicides of this generation: ". . . a man who decides to commit suicide puts a full stop to his being, he turns his back on his past, he declares himself a bankrupt and his memories to be unreal. They can no longer help or save him, he has put himself beyond their reach. The continuity of his inner life is broken, his personality is at an end . . . " . The suicides retain the freedom to kill themselves which is regarded by them as a form of affirmation.

The artist values his life and truth so much that he cannot withstand their negation. The suicide is deprived of all choices since he loses the uniqueness of his self and the distinctiveness of his situation. Many artists think that suicide is better than survival. Beckett's characters survive suicide and lead a kind of posthumous immobile lives with a language which confuses rather than mourns their situations. Since the artist cannot escape from the labour of his art, he confronts the confusion of his experiences. The greater the demand on his rationality, the greater the imaginative resources he must seek. The burden of intelligence leaves in dissatisfied and restless. Extremist poets undergo psychic exploration along the crests and troughs of the tolerable and the intolerable. They are committed to the raw material of

dreams. The grief, guilt and rage which they elliptically express through dreams are that which they want to express explicitly and consciously. Dreams are only metaphoric representations of the reality of experiences. Nanditha's poetry is cannibalistic like the extremist poetry of Plath or Sexton.

In the case of confessional, autobiographical, neurotic or narcissistic writers, writing is the direct outcome of psychic disintegration. The artist undergoes a centripetal spin towards suicide due to disintegration of the self. This is countered by a centrifugal desire for psychic wholeness and integration. The artist achieves psychic reintegration through the extreme step of self sacrifice. Thus, he finds a new identity through the very process of self extinction. The artist finds self destructiveness a way to normalize himself, to attain consummation of his art and life. It helps him to cope with threatening crises and to combat overwhelming external forces. In art or literature, it is achieved through the twin processes of transposition of opposites and transmutation of objectives. Self destruction promises both relief and fulfilment. Therefore, the artist discovers certain affinity with death. He creates his own versions of death in order to transcend the situation or resolve the conflict. This is done by changing an intolerable reality into an idealized existence, failing which such a state is anticipated in death. The artist finds life and death so ambiguous that he libidinizes reality and turns death into an idealized state of existence.

Suicide is a strategy of death capable of manipulative acts which includes a sense of healing. The artist finds that though death is a calamity fringed with pain and defeat, it is a fulfilling kind of reality. He finds his art a means to retrieve his self submerged in the misery of existence. Since art is a mirror to nature, the artist finds out his identity through art. The realization of identity changes him beyond redemption. The artist merges with the image. In his quest for identity, the artist vanishes into his art to find fulfillment and a posthumous life materialized in his art. In his struggles with death, he finds that though he cannot overcome it physically, he can transcend it aesthetically. Thus the creative act alters the social will and gains immortality to the artist. Nanditha's suicide is an inevitable consequence of her poetry circumscribed by marginality whereas Shalvy's suicide is a manifest case of scapegoating. Jocasta's suicide is a result of social/cultural orchestrization whereas Seymour Glass's suicide is motivated by redundant social relations. Thus, suicide is a very interesting topic to read and research. Anilesh's book provides an introduction to the readers interested in unravelling the mystique around suicide. In this context, it is but worthy to

remember the cryptic statement of the Russian poet Mayakowsky in his suicide note: “I don’t recommend it for others.”

INTRODUCTION

Suicide, which is generally understood as the act of intentional self-killing, is as ancient as humanity itself. This fatal gesture has been practised for thousands of years in almost all societies irrespective of their geographical and cultural specialities. As a form of social behaviour, each culture has developed its own views on suicide. These cultural perspectives can be seen ranging from outright condemnation to silent acceptance. Philosophy, psychology and law have tried to demystify this catastrophic act. Such perspectives also vary, from viewing it as the single exit from the universal absurdity to symptomising it as a mental disorder. They have also read it as the final exit from one's problems, a cry for help, an act done upon the realisation of the meaninglessness of life and a powerful means for political protest, amongst other interpretations. But, due to the special nature of suicide, it cannot be said if there is any single reason which functions as the real driving force behind each individual example. Rather, the reasons can be many and complex. It is better to see the reasons for suicide as a conglomeration of different responses to several issues about which, sometimes, even the person who is committing the act is not aware. But, contrary to this fact, it can be seen that cases of suicide can be read as the outcome of isolated immediate reasons. It is as if one commits suicide as the solution of a certain problem which can be analysed objectively. A water-tight compartmentalism has been brought among the reasons of suicide. The paradox in it is that the rate of suicide is high after this "objective analysis" and its "solutions", even in the most developed societies of the world. Since one's identity is conceived as a social and cultural construct, a complex labyrinth of various ideologies and world-views, it can be seen that no "correct" reading is possible on any of our actions including suicide. His/her "manyness" stands beyond all attempts to categorise the act.

A general reading of the criticism concerning the suicides of literary characters and writers will reveal that linear readings have been imposed on the majority of them. Their suicides have been deciphered as the outcome of obvious objective causes. A thorough reading will reveal that most of these critiques are myopic critical exercises done on the basis of particular critical theories. In this regard, they can be seen as readings from certain

fixed positions. Moreover, they can be seen adhering to their principles which forbid other readings from existing, rather than denying those readings to be true.

Considering this, my first attempt in this book is to acknowledge and unveil the chaotic infinity of the driving forces that lie behind the suicides in each text. For this purpose, I apply the poststructural theoretical concept of Text to the phenomenon of suicide. In other words, what I am trying to do in this book is to see the cases of suicide, which I mention here, as texts. I argue that suicide has been previously read as 'works', as closed spaces which offered singular meanings. I attempt to read or re-read them as texts, the methodological field of which can be interpreted infinitely. So, in this sense, my endeavour can be summarised under two approaches: unveiling the contradictions and lacunae of the linear critiques of suicide, and simultaneously offering a reading which does not *adhere* to any specific theoretical principle. For analysis, I consider five cases of suicide among which four are from the literary sphere – two are the suicide of literary characters, and two are of writers. The fifth case is based on the actual suicides of the marginalised people of Kerala. For the concept of Text, the ideas of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and Stanley Fish are adopted.

The first chapter is a general account of the history of suicide. It identifies suicide as a social practice since time immemorial, and notes the practical impossibility to collect all the data of this fatal act within the limited time of my research. So, in this chapter, I mention the different perspectives of suicide. I describe how the prominent cultures, religions, philosophical and psychological schools of the world view the phenomenon of suicide. Accompanying this description, for the easy understanding of the analyses, I give a brief summary of the arguments of four great thinkers on suicide: Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Albert Camus and Emile Durkheim. The second chapter functions as the theoretical framework of the project. This chapter is an attempt to describe in which sense the concept of Text is applied in the arguments. Since the concept of Text is one the most problematical ones in contemporary theory, I try to explain the definitions offered by reputed theorists like Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Stanley Fish and the New Historicists. Though they differ in their ideas about Text at several points, this chapter contains their notions of Text which have similarities in nature. The chapter also explains how the researcher views suicide as Text, and analyses the benefits of doing so. The third chapter consists of studies of two literary characters. The first one is Jocasta, the infamous mother/wife of Oedipus, whose story is mentioned in

Sophocles' classic play *Oedipus Rex*. This analysis is an attempt to disclose the gaps in the linear readings done on Jocasta, and to unveil the unnoticed facets of Jocasta's personality. The second case in this chapter is a re-reading of Seymour Glass, the character who was immortalised in the fiction of J.D. Salinger. This reading tries to see a Seymour who is not fragmented by literary principles. The fourth chapter deals with the suicides of two writers, Nanditha and Shalvy. Nanditha, a young poetess, committed suicide in 1990 in Kerala. She can be seen as interpreted largely with the help of her biographical details. In other words, her poems, which were published posthumously, were studied on the basis of the actual events in her life. I attempt to free Nanditha from these critical confinements, and read her suicide as a text, a methodological field which does not hold any confinements. Toward this purpose, I re-analyse a generally unnoticed poem of Nanditha from a different perspective. Shalvy was an equally talented poet in Malayalam literature. He has several similarities with Nanditha, and many of his poems were also published posthumously. Shalvy's poems, which were largely personal and confessional in nature, were not given their due importance. They were suffused with suicidal imagery, and he can be seen admitting his lifelong preoccupation with suicide in the 'pre' and 'post' notes attached to them. But, it can be seen that Shalvy's suicide was read on the basis of the actual events in his life. My attempt, in this study is to bring out Shalvy's suicidal inclination concealed behind and between his lines in various manifestations. The final chapter has two parts which, in a sense, are related to each other. If the first part is based on the disproportionate increase in the rate of the suicide of the subaltern in Kerala, the second is a psycho-cultural analysis of the suicide of a particular person, a girl who belongs to this marginalised group in the region. In this case, the suicide is seen as a cultural text. The study functions on the theoretical presupposition that one's identity is a cultural construct, and each individual has multiple identities. It discloses how the generally unnoticed (or intentionally quietened) psycho-cultural reasons work as potential driving forces of suicide. It also tries to explain how the subaltern re-writes the social/cultural Text of suicide.

These readings, which may seem unconnected at all other points, are connected at one axial point: in my treatment of all of them as Texts, in the modern theoretical sense. Only the "demoniac plurality" of textuality could have enabled me to range so freely among my choices. By the same token, my readings are not *the* readings of suicide, but unlike the work-based reading which closes off further avenues of interpretation, my Text based readings leave the doors open for dialogue, discussion, for almost anything but conspiratorial, authoritative silence. This vocal nature, which I hope my

readings have managed to indicate, can allow reinterpretations of literary characters, and acknowledge that a person can hold within his/her self the identities of writer, individual and suicide among others without contradiction. Most importantly, such an approach may allow the silenced (whose suicides are not usually subjected to critique) and subaltern victims of the social misuse of power not just a voice but even perhaps a Bakhtinian polyphony[1], one which may carry the seeds of revolution and subversion.

[1] Polyphony, which literally means 'many voices' is a concept used by Mikhail Bakhtin in critical analysis. In literary criticism, the binary monophonic/polyphonic is used to distinguish between literary texts. In the former type of text, the author represents an elevated and authoritative voice above the voices of the main protagonists, and in the latter type, the voices of the author and main protagonists are equal. If monophony is strongly linked with asymmetrical communication models, imbalanced power relations and hegemonic structures in a text, polyphony is associated with symmetrical communication models, equitable power relations and even democracy (Vaagan, Robert W., "Open Access and Bakhtinian Dialogism." http://elpub.scix.net/data/ works/att/210- _elpub2006.content.pdf).

CHAPTER I

PERSPECTIVES OF SUICIDE

Etymologically, the word *suicide*, which is now used both as a verb to refer to the act of intentional self-killing and as a noun describing a person who commits suicide, can be traced back to its Latin roots. It is formed from a combination of the Latin words: *sui*-, which means "of oneself" and *cide* or *cidium* which means "to kill". As a behavioural act seen in society, suicide is probably as ancient as humanity itself. Suicide has been practised for thousands of years – existing in contemporary, historic and prehistoric societies – but its moral, mental, social, ethical and physical dimensions still continue to haunt the individual human mind as well as the collective social conscience, as a source of both embarrassment and guilt whenever it comes up for discussion. The act of suicide has been studied countless times, both to comprehend the motivating factors behind it and to find potential solutions. So far, no research has succeeded in presenting a holistic account, though each attempt has contributed something new to the continuing debates on the subject. Naturally, most of these studies were conducted on the basis of the then dominant ideologies and theories. The concern over this act of self-annihilation is clearly indicated by the fact that a whole branch of enquiry, entitled suicidology – defined as “the study of the causes and prevention of suicide” – exists today as a professional discipline with global academic branches.

Societal responses to suicide range from outraged condemnation through mild disapproval to acceptance, incorporation and even approbation. The varying perceptions of suicide have obviously been shaped in most cases by culturally dominant perspectives on themes such as religion, honour and the meaning of life, and therefore, they differ from time to time and from society to society. Current history provides viewpoints for contemporary opinions on suicide, and the historical approach makes it possible for us to see suicide in different temporal and spatial contexts, to understand the meaning it has for people of varying backgrounds, and to understand the close relation between suicide and changing social conditions, value systems, institutions and ideologies. Since it is manifestly impossible here to do an exhaustive

study on the recorded history of suicide and the reactions and speculations it has engendered, I have selected a few societies and their responses to suicide to analyse in this chapter. I also mention some of the most prominent religious, medical and philosophical views on suicide.

We need to go through the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, if our socio-religious group for study is the Jewish community. It can be seen that biblical suicides are rare. There are only six instances reported in the Hebrew Bible and one in the New Testament. They are the cases of Saul, the first king of Israel; his loyal armour bearer, Ahitophel, the bosom friend of Absalom; Zimri, who usurped the throne of Israel in 876 BC; Samson, who killed himself with the Philistines at the temple of Dagon; and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus. Their motivations vary, from a desire for an honourable death and loyalty to their master or friend to the awareness of hopelessness; from rejection to an unextinguished thirst for revenge or a sense of utmost guilt and repentance. However, it should be noticed that Jewish society did not condemn the act, and there was no specific word for suicide in their culture. The 'Suicide' of Abimelech is also mentioned in the Old Testament (Judges), but it is a case open to debate (Perlin).

As far as Greco-Roman culture is concerned, there were several instances of honour suicides committed to avoid capture and humiliation. The cases of Demosthenes, the opponent of the Macedonians, and Hannibal, the Carthaginian chief who killed himself by consuming poison are prominent examples of this kind of suicide. A Samurai[1] kind of bodyguard was also maintained by some Greek captains. They were bound by a vow to live and die with their master. Another form of institutional suicide which prevailed in Greco-Roman civilization was that of widow self-immolation (Perlin). In this custom, which is analogous to the Hindu custom of Sati,[2] a widow or a concubine had to commit suicide when the husband or master died (Perlin). Theatricality and exhibitionism were also evident in some cases, like that of

[1] The samurai were a Japanese warrior class. They showed utmost loyalty to their masters and they were even ready to commit suicide for their masters (Perlin).

[2] Anglicized as Suttee, it is a feminine noun formed from the verbal root Sat, meaning real, true, good or virtuous. Such epithets were applied especially to a widow who on the death of her husband proved her devotion by being burned with him on his funeral pyre. But early Christian missionaries erroneously applied the term sati to the act itself. Though self-immolation may sometimes have been voluntary, and a genuine expression of devotion, it was more often an obligation imposed by custom, to show her loyalty to husband (Bary 73).

the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus Proteus[3] who killed himself at the Olympic festival in 165 AD. Prominent examples among Roman suicides would be Cassius and Brutus, conspirators in the assassination of Julius Caesar; Pontius Pilate, who was the 'Judge' of Jesus; and two emperors, Quintilian and Nero. In short, suicide in Greco-Roman culture was the physical manifestation of several causes, such as unresolved emotional conflict, inescapable humiliation, utmost loyalty and a basic frustration with life.

As far as the Asian cultures are considered, the Chinese, Indian and Japanese attitudes regarding suicide are here taken as representative samples. Though these cultures have internal differences in their attitudes towards suicide, their views can be seen converging at the key point of *honour*. In Chinese culture, the act of suicide was always regarded ambivalently. Ritual suicide was relatively common among the Chinese as a form of political protest. It was a preferred method either as a means of escaping from persecution or as a form of extreme political protest. Another kind of suicide that existed and was valorised in Chinese culture was that of lovers. Instances of this can be seen in 17th century Chinese classics such as the *Butterfly Lovers* and *A Dream of Red Mansions* (Ling).

In Indian culture, suicide has traditionally had a ritual background, but has also been a form of political protest, something apparent in the relatively recent freedom fighters against colonialism, as a warrior code or a way to escape from being dishonoured by one's enemies. *Sallekhana,*[4] *Jauhar*[5] and Sati were the major forms of ritual suicides in Indian culture.

Perhaps, the greatest traditional reverence for ritual suicide in Asia was seen in Japan. Until recently, when the number of suicides went beyond all limits, they did not consider it a problem. Of course, this tacit sanction of suicide made an extremely complex ritual out of it, and the Japanese called it *Seppuku*, better known as *Hara-kiri* in English lexicons. This refers to the

[3] "In 165 A.D. He [Proteus] ended his life before a large crowd by cremating himself ritually on a pyre in the Indian manner" (Perlin 7).

[4] The term Sallekhana refers to sacred death by fasting when the end of life is very near due to unavoidable circumstances such as illness or old age. This tradition, part of the Hindu culture, can also be seen happening in the case of Vidura in *The Mahabharata*.The Satyagraha movement of suicide as protest has the method of fasting until death in common with Sallekhana.

[5] Voluntary death of royal Rajput women in order to avoid capture or dishonour at the hand of their enemy.

ritual of self-disembowelling which was performed in feudal Japan to maintain one's honour. Japanese authors have written about this, some of whom – such as Akutagawa, Kawabata and Mishima – actually committed suicide. Japanese law does not criminalise suicide, though now they consider assisting or encouraging suicide as a serious crime (West).

There have always been, however, attitudinal differences between major religions regarding their views on the act of suicide. Christianity has had a changing attitude towards suicide through history. Early Christianity considered death in defence of or conviction in their faith as martyrdom, as an opportunity to die as a blood witness to Christ. It did not condemn the practice. Even the death of Jesus Christ was considered as a kind of suicide by theologists like Tertullian (Perlin). As Christianity became a dominant religion of the Roman Empire, its views on suicide changed considerably. It was St Augustine who presented the first Christian condemnation of suicide. His arguments were based on the biblical commandment "thou shall not kill." This was a humanitarian opposition. Later, suicide was equated with murder, and started being viewed from a criminal perspective. Several legal penalties and social judgments such as confiscation of property, degradation of the cadaver, refusal of burial in consecrated ground, defaming their memories and persecution of their families were what awaited potential suicides, and even attempted suicides. In the sixth century, suicide became a religious sin and an ecclesiastical crime. In modern Christianity, suicide has been considered a grave and mortal sin, and any attempt to commit suicide is threatened with excommunication according to the ecclesiastical rules. Moreover, suicide denies all human claims to enter into Heaven and communion with God, which is the ultimate aim of every Christian. Some Christians, while believing that suicide is generally wrong, may hold the opinion that people who choose suicide are severely distressed and should be forgiven. It also should be mentioned that there is no specific verse in the Bible that explicitly states that suicide leads directly to Hell.

Islam views suicide as a sinful and highly detrimental act to one's spiritual journey. In Islam, killing oneself and killing other people are both prohibited. The Qur'an says: "Do not kill yourself" (4: 29). According to Islamic law, any person who dies by suicide and shows no regret for his wrongdoing will spend an eternity in Hell re-enacting the act by which he took his own life. Suicide is considered a cardinal sin in Islam. Muslims believe those who have committed suicide to be forbidden from entering Paradise. "And do not kill yourselves," declares Quran (nor kill one

another)" (Shoib et al., 2022). The acts of suicide bombing and *Jihad*[6] are therefore a controversial issue in Islam with some groups considering it admirable and justified while many others consider it as a breach of religious dictums. Judaism has, traditionally, in the light of its great emphasis on the sanctity of life, viewed suicide as one of the most serious sins. Jewish law in all cases has always forbidden suicide. Assistance in suicide and requesting such assistance are also forbidden. The prohibition against suicide is not specifically recorded in the *Talmud*[7], and the post-Talmudic tractate *Semahot*[8] serves as the basis for Jewish laws on suicide. It focuses on the importance of life, and sees suicide as tantamount to denying God's goodness in the world. Despite this, under extreme circumstances when there has been no choice but to either be killed or forced to betray their religion, some Jews have preferred to commit individual or mass suicide, prominent examples being Masada and York Castle, which were early sites of Jewish persecution leading to mass suicide. According to a Circular from the City of York Council, there is a memorial plaque on the tower saying: "On the night of Friday 16 March 1190 some 150 Jewish people of York, having sought protection in the Royal Castle on this site from a mob incited by Richard Malebisse and others, chose to die at each other's hands rather than renounce their faith."

In Hinduism, suicide is considered as equally sinful to murdering others. The scriptures generally state that to die by suicide or by some violent death results in becoming a ghost (V. Jayaram). However, under certain circumstances it is considered acceptable in Hinduism to end one's life by fasting. This practice, known as *Sallekhana*, requires so much time and willpower that there is no danger of acting on an impulse. It also allows time for the individual to settle all worldly affairs, to ponder on life and draw closer to God. Other forms of suicide which the Hindu religion sanctions are *Sati* and *Jauhar* which have already been mentioned in this chapter.

According to Buddhism, an individual's past acts bear a heavy influence on what one experiences in the present, and present acts, in turn, become the

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[6] The religious war of Muslims against unbelievers in Islam, inculcated as a duty by the Qur'an and traditions. It dates back to the Crusades of the Middle Ages.

[7] The *Talmud* is a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history.

[8] The treatise *Semahot* is a post-Talmudic product and originated in Palestine. The tractate contains almost complete instructions as to the treatment of the dying and the dead, from the commencement of the death-agony to the arrangement of the grave which receives the remains.

background influence for future experiences. Past deeds, i.e., *Karma* (if negative), along with the impermanence and illusion of life, *Maya*, are the reasons for suffering. It is only by realizing one's true nature that one can escape from suffering. Buddhism holds the view that life is precious and the first principle one should follow according to Buddha is *Ahimsa* or non-violence. Buddhism believes that a person may be reborn as an animal preyed on by others, as a frustrated ghost, or in Hell. So, suicide as an attempted escape from the suffering of worldly life is totally ineffective. In addition, it holds the view that any harm to oneself or others will cause regression in the path of a Buddhist on his spiritual journey. Buddha explains this idea in *Vinaya-pitika*, the authentic Buddhist scripture: "Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or should praise the beauty of death, or should incite (anyone) to death...he is not in communion" (qtd. in Harvey 289). Early Buddhism considered death as not the end of life, but only a transition. So, suicide was not even an escape from anything, and it was seen as an inappropriate action. But the Buddhist texts include many cases of suicide which the Buddha himself condoned or accepted. However, it also should be mentioned that Buddha's praise of the suicides was because their minds were selfless, desireless, and they had received enlightenment at the moment of suicide.

In Zen Buddhism, an offshoot of traditional Buddhism, suicide is considered an honourable alternative to being killed by others or continuing a life in shame or misery. The most common method of suicide in Zen was cutting the hara, i.e. the subtle centre of death. It was formally known as *Seppuku* or *Hara-kiri*. These views on suicide have influenced the Zen followers in making mercy a criterion for euthanasia. They consider the equanimity or the preparedness of mind the main criterion for suicide. Though strongly opposed by the Buddhists, religious suicides were known to Jain ascetics, and Mahavira himself is said to have voluntarily starved to death by the protracted fast known as *Itvara* or *Sallekhana.* Mahavira is reported to have commented:

> A Jain monk who wishes to end his life in this way, and thereby rid his soul of a great deal of Karma, and perhaps even obtain full salvation, must prepare for the final penance by a course of graduated fasting lasing for as long as twelve years. If, however, he is sick and unable to maintain the course of rigid self-discipline to which he is vowed, he may starve himself to death without the preliminary preparation. (Qtd. in Bary 69)

Various societies have their own laws, which accept or reject suicide. The Athenians punished it by cutting off the hand of the deceased and refusing

to bury it with the body. While Plato and Aristotle both regarded it as immoral, the Stoics publicly supported it. The later Roman Christian law punished suicide by the confiscation of the property and the denial of a religious burial. Sometimes, the corpses were buried at the crossroads with a stake driven through the body. It was a practice which was considered necessary to keep the tainted soul from leaving the corpse and becoming a ghost. Though this system was temporarily discontinued, it was revived in England in 1870. Other Christian countries have been equally severe in their criminal laws regarding suicide, indicating a combination of theological anxiety, economic disturbance, and social disruption associated with it. In France, the Criminal Ordinance of 1670 demanded that the body of a convicted suicide be dragged face down through the streets behind a horse and deposited in the town's dumping ground. In Sweden, under the 1608 criminal code of Charles IX, the bodies of those who had committed suicide were burned on a funeral pyre in the woods (Rubin).

Modern medicine treats suicide as a mental health issue, and overwhelming or persistent suicidal thoughts are considered a medical emergency. Psychology and psychiatry treat suicide as a mental health issue. In psychology, the causes of suicide are generally categorised under two heads: violence or aggression, on the one hand, and depression on the other. Violence or aggression has always been counted as a potential reason of suicide by psychologists, and it can vary from other-destructive to self-destructive behaviour. Robert Litman, a reputed psychologist, has pointed out the link between outwardly and inwardly directed aggression as interchangeable aspects of *thanatos*, the Freudian death instinct (Perlin). According to Freud, loss of love objects and narcissistic injury (among other things) can lead a person to aggression. Similarly, the failure to alter one's personal environment and the apparent inability to conform or adapt with it may result in a retroflection[9] or rage in which the object for irrational reaction becomes one's own self. Such feelings may assume the proportions of death wishes directed against both another and oneself. The same idea is mentioned vividly by the reputed sociologist Emile Durkheim: "The individual always attacks himself in an access of anger, whether or not he has previously attacked another" (248).

Depression, another equally potential reason of suicide is defined in psychology as a mood disturbance which is characterised by feelings of

[9] In psychology, retroflection is the inability to externalise one's emotions. It is the act of directing a difficult emotion such as anger at oneself rather than at somebody who has provoked the emotion.

sadness, despair, and discouragement resulting from, and normally proportionate to some personal loss or tragedy. According to Seymour Perlin, Clinical Professor, George Washington University, the depressive symptoms can be placed in four categories: emotional, cognitive, motivational and somatic. Each of these clusters has a depressive impact both dependently and independently upon the depressed individual. The relevance of depression in suicide is based on the idea that the person who commits suicide may see his or her actions as some sort of solution to a severe physical or psychological dilemma. In the depressed individual, the guilt of transgression, real or fantasised, may be pacified by a suicidal attempt, which symbolically serves as a form of suicide. According to Perlin, a re-union fantasy can be seen functioning as a catalyst in the depression of suicide cases. The fantasy of reunion with the loved one may precipitate intense identification with this person in the patient, and he will see suicide as the means through which a better life is obtained. Through its relation to depression, suicide is associated with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia and monomania. Recent reports suggest that hopelessness may be a better indicator of the intensity of current suicidal ideation and the risk implied there than depression (Perlin).

There is actually a phenomenon which may be called "literary suicide", rather than suicidal literature. One of the prominent and early texts in this genre would be *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* by A. Alvarez. The writer himself comments: "Suicide has permeated Western culture like a dye that cannot be washed out" (qtd. in *The Village Voice*) Although the aims of this compelling, compassionate work are broadly cultural and literary, the narrative is rooted in personal experience: it begins with a long memoir of Sylvia Plath and ends with an account of the author's own suicide attempt. Within this dramatic framework, Alvarez launches his enquiry into the final taboo of human behaviour, and traces changing attitudes towards suicide from the perspective of literature. He follows the black thread leading from Dante through Donne and the romantic agony, to the Savage God at the heart of modern literature. *The Review* would go on to comment: "The Savage God is the first study to attempt the historical, literary, philosophical dimensions of the mystery of suicide...It is brilliant, touching, and oddly passionate...An ambitious, exhaustive exploration into the nature of the self-destructive element in man." According to the *New York Times*: "To write a beautiful book about suicide...to transform the subject into something beautiful—this is the forbidding task that A. Alvarez set for himself...He has succeeded." Before examining suicide from the perspective of contemporary literary theory, it would be appropriate to draw a connection between "literary suicides" and all other suicides undertaken by

any human, at any time and place for any reason. In his essay "Literary Suicide: A Question of Style" Norman N. Holland rightly comments:

> So dazzling is the fact of suicide, particularly a writer's suicide, its headline blinds us to the finer print of retrospect. We forget how ready we are to explain other things writers do, and we settle for glamour phrases like suicide as the "savage god." Perhaps we can change our style and accept the idea that suicide, even literary suicide, for all that we can invest in it of the sacred, is still a human act. It embodies a choice among alternatives made through the same principles of human motivation as other choices, even though this is a choice to end choice itself.

I intend to consider literary suicide in two main categories: the suicide of certain literary characters and the suicide actually committed by some writers. Shakespearean characters, such as Cleopatra and Othello, are prominent among those literary characters whose suicides contributed mainly to their fame. While Othello commits suicide by stabbing himself, Cleopatra kills herself by allowing a poisonous asp to bite her. Her poetic pronouncements during her last moments are immortalised by Shakespeare in his *Anthony and Cleopatra*:

> "…Husband, I come:
> Now to that my courage prove my title!
> I am fire and air; my other elements
> I give to baser life…"

She invites the asp: "…come, thou mortal wretch / With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate / of life at once untie…" (V.ii: 280). Perhaps the most influential example in the first category may be Werther, the young romantic hero of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, whose suicide was imitated by thousands of young men all over the world. Another literary character whose suicide is well known is the eponymous heroine of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. More than anything else in Anna Karenina, Anna's suicide casts a shadow over the entire novel because it both invites and ultimately escapes interpretation. Other famous literary characters in western literature who have committed suicide include Jocasta, the ill-fated mother/wife of Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, and Antigone, the unfortunate daughter of Oedipus. Shakespeare has given us Ophelia, the forsaken ladylove of Hamlet, and the quite contrasting figure of Portia, Brutus' wife in *Julius Caesar*, both of whom seek death through the elements; one by water and the other by fire. We also have among our list of character suicides Madame Bovary, the titular character who lives beyond her means and has adulterous affairs in Flaubert's famous novel; Smerdyakov, the

villainous bastard in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*; and Seymour Glass, the mystic-schizoid hero of J.D. Salinger who figures most prominently in the short story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" but dominates by his absence in both the later novellas, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*, and *Franny and Zooey.*

Moving on to my second grouping, actual writers who committed suicide, many belong to the American Confessional School of Poetry. The list of suicides among them includes John Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Among them, Plath is reported to have made six suicide attempts. She speaks about her morbid preoccupation with suicide in one of her poems:

> "Dying
> Is an art, like everything else
> I do it exceptionally well." ("Lady Lazarus")

Anne Sexton can be seen stating:

> "…suicides have a special language
> Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
> They never ask *why build.*" ("Wanting to Die")

Other major writers who committed suicide include Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Koestler, Virginia Woolf, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Yasunari Kawabata, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Yukio Mishima.

It should be mentioned here that Malayalam literature (which I intend to examine as it is the regional language of my natal state – Kerala), though certainly a minor one in numerical terms, when compared with the literary works in English or other widely translated languages like Russian, has a good number of writers who have portrayed suicidal characters. Unfortunately, Malayalam literature also has a disproportionate number of talented writers who have actually committed suicide. The second list includes Edappalli Raghavan Pilla, Rajalakshmi, Nandanar, Subrahmanya Das, Sanil Das, Nanditha, Shalvy, T.P. Kishore and T. Guhan. Among them, Edappalli Raghavan Pilla has been immortalised as Ramanan the protagonist in his friend Changampuzha Krishna Pilla's pastoral elegy *Ramanan*. He was a young poet of great potential when he hanged himself in 1936. Edappalli, the man and the poet, was much studied, and qualified as the first romantic outsider in Malayalam literature. Rajalakshmi was a reputed short story writer and a novelist who committed suicide at the age of 34. P.C. Gopalan, who was known under the pseudonym of Nandanar,

was also a famous Malayalam short story writer whose general theme was the wretched life of army men (though he also wrote some of the best works for children in Malayalam). He committed suicide in 1974. Shalvy, a highly talented poet and publisher of Malayalam literature committed suicide in 2003. His poems are anthologised under the titles *Alaukikam* [The Ethereal], and *Nostalgia*. Nanditha, the young poetess whose suicide is analysed in the fourth chapter of this book, was an English lecturer. Her exceptionally brilliant poems, which were concealed in her personal diary, were found and published posthumously by Pappiyon Books. T.P. Kishore was a short story writer, and Sanil Das, Subrahmanya Das and T.Guhan were poets.

Suicide has always been an interesting though knotted question, one which philosophers have regularly pursued through varying avenues. Therefore, naturally we have philosophical arguments which support and oppose the phenomenon of suicide. An exhaustive study of all these is not practical here; however; it would be worthwhile to categorise some of the major standpoints and to briefly summarise their fundamental premises as an indication of the milieu in which I intend to present my argument.

According to John Stuart Mill, the chief proponent of classical liberalism, the individual takes all decisions. Since the *sine qua non* of liberty is the power of the individual to make choices, any choice that might deprive him or her of the ability to make further choices should be prevented. Thus, for Mill, selling oneself into slavery or killing oneself should be prevented in order to avoid precluding the ability to make further choices. According to the utilitarianism of William Godwin, suicide is almost always a mistake because more pleasure, one of the chief aims of life, can be gained by living. Immanuel Kant sees suicide as an unethical act because it always fulfils its function as a means. In his view, every action of an individual should be consistent with the idea of humanity as an end in itself. Existentialism, a major philosophical school of the 20th century placed suicide in a vital position. Albert Camus, whose views will be discussed later in this chapter, argued that suicide was the rejection of freedom. He thought that fleeing from the absurdity of reality into illusions, religion or death was not the way out. In Jean Jacques Rousseau's words, every man has a right to risk his own life in order to preserve it. However, other philosophers of the social contract such as Hobbes and Locke reject this claim, forbidding every man from destroying his life since preserving it is the natural law, and man is obliged to follow it.

Several philosophical schools and thinkers are pro-suicidal. One of the greatest supporters of suicide in philosophy is Arthur Schopenhauer, the

ardent proponent of pessimism. He denied the argument that suicide was immoral, and saw it as one's birthright. Another philosophical school which supported suicide was liberalism, which asserts that a person's life belongs only to him or her and no other person has any right to force their ideals that life must be lived, on others. Rather, only the individual involved can make such a decision, and whatever decision he or she does make should be respected. Nihilism, which rejects all kinds of institutions and individual power, acknowledges that all things and doctrines are equally meaningless, and suicide is not excluded from this. This chapter concludes by explaining the views of four great thinkers of the modern age on suicide.

Friedrich Nietzsche, perhaps the most original and provocative thinker of the 19th century held a strong supportive attitude to suicide in certain circumstances. His views on suicide are mentioned in the 36th section of his iconoclastic work, *Twilight of the Idols*, which is an outright attack on the Christian condemnation of death and subsequent glorification of life. In his work, Nietzsche opines that the invalid, the person who is no more productive, is a parasite on society. His life is in no sense better than that of the plants. Instead of claiming life, these dependent people tend to cling to their right to life. Here, Nietzsche endows physicians with the duty of communicating social contempt to such people. He exhorts physicians to shoulder the new responsibility of acting as mediators who transfer fresh doses of disgust to the patients so that they can learn the value of dying properly, which is committing suicide. Nietzsche vehemently recommends free choice in which, according to him, the only real leave-taking from life is possible. According to him, it is only in suicide that the subject is present and conscious. In this regard, he accuses Christianity for its abuse of the weakness of dying. Again Nietzsche attacks Christianity for its support of the so-called natural death, which in his words, is the most contemptible death that unconsciously and hesitatingly happens at the wrong time. In Nietzsche's words, it is due to the awareness of individuality and self-esteem one really desires to die differently and consciously. He says: "From love of *life* one ought to desire to die differently from this freely, consciously, not accidentally, not suddenly overtaken…" (100).

Here, by attacking the general Christian notion of life and death, Nietzsche can be seen turning the idea of natural death and suicide upside down. According to him, the death that is dragged on unnecessarily and postponed is the real unnatural death and the consciously executed self-annihilation is the natural death. The former is life-negative and the latter is life-affirmative. Moreover, Nietzsche considered suicide as an opportunity for correcting the error of being born. He states: "We have no power to prevent

ourselves being born, but we can rectify this error – for it is sometimes an error" (100).

According to him, life itself receives more advantage and dignity from such acts of conscious and proper death than it receives from the life spent in social virtues like renunciation. However, through these arguments Nietzsche removed the dichotomy between positive life and negative death, and added the new concept of suicide nourishing and enriching life.

Arthur Schopenhauer, one of the most well-known philosophers of the 19th century and the great proponent of pessimism, had a strong pro-suicidal view. In his monumental essay entitled *On Suicide*, he attempts to unveil the vulnerability of the western theological and philosophical arguments, which condemn the act of suicide as a crime. Though he does not glorify the act, he can be seen defending the socially and legally tabooed act with his iconoclastic arguments. Since there is no branding of suicide as a crime in the Old and New Testaments, the condemnation on it can be seen as something based on purely philosophical grounds made with the help of easily refutable sophisms. Schopenhauer sees the act of suicide of one who does not have any acquaintances, friends or relatives as the confirmation and application of self-will. According to him, the clergy do not have any right to deny someone who has committed suicide an honourable burial since they do not have any biblical sanction. Legal prohibition is a different question, but he mocks the law which tries to frighten the potential suicide with a forthcoming penalty. He argues:

> "…the prohibition is ridiculous; for what penalty can frighten a man who is not afraid of death itself? If the law punishes people for trying to commit suicide, it is punishing the want of skill that makes the attempt a failure" (307).

Schopenhauer brings out several pro-suicidal arguments from history, such as those of Pliny and Seneca. He also cites supportive arguments from Stoicism,[10] Peripatetic philosophy[11] and Hinduism. He even brings in

[10] A classical philosophical school which argued that virtue, and not pleasure, was the only good, the natural law, and the key principle of the universe. Zeno is considered as the founder of Stoicism.

[11] The Peripatetics were the members of the school of philosophy whose teachings were derived from their founder Aristotle. The term is drawn from "walking about" due to the walkways of the Lyceum where the group met. It has also been paralleled with Aristotle's alleged tendency to walk about as he discussed philosophy with his students.

instances of literary characters such as Othello, Countess Terzky and Hamlet. In Schopenhauer's view, only one valid reason exists against the act of suicide: its thwarting of the highest moral aim, the communion with God through suffering. In Christianity, the real object of life is suffering, which leads man to the natural death and a subsequent release from the worldly misery, and suicide only substitutes or subverts it. But it problematises the issue of asceticism and martyrdom. He states that it is a general fact that man decides to put an end to his life when the terrors of life outweigh the terrors of death. But the terrors of death and the will to live create considerable resistance in executing the act. Schopenhauer explains it with the help of the metaphor of a dream:

> When in some dreadful and ghastly dream, we reach the moment of greatest horror, it awakens us; thereby banishing all the hideous shapes that were born of the night. And life is a dream; when the moment of greatest horror compels us to break it off, the same thing happens. (310)

According to him, every man shrinks at the thought of dying a wilful death and it arises from the will to live. But, as we tend to forget the mental troubles when we are in greater bodily pain and vice versa, a man overcomes this sentinel will to live and the terrors of death and executes the act. He concludes his essay by shedding light on one more aspect of suicide:

> Suicide may also be regarded as an experiment – a question which man puts to Nature, trying to force her to an answer. The question is this: What change will death produce in a man's existence, and in his insight into the nature of things? It is a clumsy experiment to make; for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness which puts the question and awaits the answer. (311)

Albert Camus, the great existentialist, is perhaps the modern philosopher who really problematised the issue of suicide in contemporary philosophical discourse. His discussion on suicide, which was expressed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, begins with the monumental statement: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide." It takes the reader directly to the heart of the problem by examining the contemporary situation where no one dies for ontological reasons. People, according to Camus, die either because life is not worth living or for illusions that gave them a reason for living. He states that suicide has never been dealt with except as a social phenomenon. And, even if it is done, it is not possible to find out the exact personal reason behind it. Camus finds here that suicide is an attempt to avoid encountering the absurdity of life. When one, who is sincere to himself, faces the absurdity of life, he feels as an alien would. Then, there would be a divorce between man and his life. As Camus confirms: "All

healthy men having thought of their own suicide, it can be seen, without further explanation, that there is a direct connection between this feeling and the longing for death."

He asks the question of whether suicide is a solution to the absurdity. Camus says that man has a strong attachment to life that is greater than all the ills of the world. Therefore, such a situation leads one either to live in Nietzschean bad faith or to suicide, which is also a game of eluding. Camus rules out the suicide which is done on the reason that life is not worth-living on the grounds that that is a truism. He again asks the question: "Does the absurd dictate death?" and demands to be logical at the bitter end of life. In short, he places the urge to commit suicide as a fundamental issue which gives an opportunity to encounter the absurd reasoning. In his words, it occupies a place, and our duty is:

> The real effort is to stay there, rather, in so far as that is possible, and to examine closely the odd vegetation of those distant regions. Tenacity and acumen are privileged spectators of this inhuman show in which absurdity, hope and death carry on their dialogue.

Emile Durkheim wrote the exhaustive study entitled *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* – a milestone in social sciences. It is a prototype of a systematic, rigorous and unrelenting attack on the subject with the data, techniques, and accumulated knowledge available in the given period. Within the confines of the book, Durkheim incorporates normal and abnormal psychology, anthropology, meteorological and other cosmic factors, religion, marriage, primitive rites and customs, social and economic crises, among other aspects. However, much of his data are collected from actual statistics and psychoanalytic psychiatry. Since it is practically impossible to go through this great work within the limits of this particular book, a chapter, which describes the individual forms of the different types of suicide, is briefly explained here.

After a thorough study of the social and extra-social factors of suicide, Durkheim tries to identify the social origins of the individual manifestations of suicide. According to Durkheim, each victim of suicide gives his act a personal stamp which expresses his temperament, the special conditions which cannot be explained by the social and general causes of the phenomenon. Here, he categorises suicides based on their characteristics into four types: egoistic, epicurean, altruistic and anomic. Egoistic suicide is characterised by a condition of melancholic languor which has relaxed all the springs of action. In it, all kinds of works inspire the person only with

indifference and aversion. What is lost in activity is made up for in thought and inner life, and self-observation and self-analysis become the chief occupation. Here, the subject becomes so enamoured of himself, detaches himself from everything external and emphasizes his isolation. His energy moves centripetally and he becomes insensitive to the outer world. Durkheim explains skilfully what is happening in an egoistic suicide:

> A mind that questions everything, unless strong enough to bear the weight of its ignorance, risks questioning itself and being engulfed in doubt. If it cannot discover the claims to existence of the objects of its questioning – and it would be miraculous if it so soon succeeded in solving so many mysteries – it will deny them all reality, the mere formulation of the problem already implying an inclination to negative solutions. (245)

The second form of suicide which he explains is the epicurean suicide in which the victim, unlike that of the egoistic suicide takes the decision cheerfully. Knowing that he can hope for no better, he decides to terminate his meaningless existence. He even does not consider the sensual pleasures as a potential barrier, and is always ready to leave the world. The third is altruistic suicide which is characterised by violent emotions and vehement commitment. Here, the victim kills himself at the command of his conscience. When altruism is at a high pitch, the impulses are more passionate and unthinking. He will then act upon an enthusiasm, and this enthusiasm itself is either happy or sombre, depending on the conception of death as a means of union with a beloved deity or an expiatory sacrifice, to appease some terrible, probably hostile power. The final one is anomic suicide in which the emotion of anger functions as the driving force. The last moments of the people who belong to this category are full of blasphemies, violent recriminations against life in general, threats, accusations etc. There is every chance with this form that murder could be committed before the act of suicide. Durkheim elaborates:

> A man abruptly cast down below his accustomed status cannot avoid exasperation at feeling a situation escape him of which he thought himself master, and his exasperation naturally revolts against the cause, whether real or imaginary, to which he attributes his ruin. If he recognises himself as to blame for the catastrophe, he takes it out on himself; otherwise on someone else. (248)

After going through all these arguments of suicide, it can be said that the phenomenon of suicide is not a monolithic concept. An overall reading of its history reveals that it is not easy to define it fully with the help of certain principles of a branch of philosophy or psychology. It goes beyond all

efforts of confinement within some principle or thought. However, I don't underestimate the ideas of the thinkers who have studied this fatal phenomenon. These ideas have helped a lot in understanding suicide, despite it remaining a mystery for the human mind. The variety of these perspectives itself is proof for the mysterious nature of suicide. Considering this nature of suicide, my attempt in the forthcoming chapters is to view suicide as an open space, which facilitates infinite readings among which none of them claims the stamp of truth or totality.

CHAPTER II

SUICIDE AS TEXT

Before approaching the concept of suicide as Text in detail, it is necessary to give a brief annotated glossary of the terminology used and the conceptual framework within which I have used these terms. A brief survey of societal and religious attitudes to suicide has already been described in the first chapter, and this chapter deals with the concept of Text which is imperative in this project. “Text" in the context of contemporary theory requires a deeper analysis and clear explanation. A very general survey of literary theory will reveal that Text is one of the most problematic concepts in the contemporary critical scenario, and it “overruns” the borders of various disciplines. So, in this chapter, I try to explain in which sense the concept of Text is applied in the study. For this purpose, the ideas of some reputed poststructuralist critics are elaborated. Since it is not relevant to detail all of their ideas about Text, a few fundamental notions which influenced and radicalised contemporary critical theory and practice, and which are also applicable to my argument are elaborated with examples.

Roland Barthes, who was qualified as famous for contradictory reasons by Jonathan Culler, is considered as the pre-eminent structuralist in literary studies. He is the one who prepared the ground for the deconstructive criticism of Jacques Derrida. This contribution of Barthes to literary theory happened at his shifting to the poststructural phase. Though his works show a significant diversity which ranges from semiotic theory and historical writings to psycho-biographical study and love and photography, his career can be roughly divided into three levels: the early Barthes who aimed to analyse the bourgeois culture and society, the structuralist semiotician who modelled Saussure’s[1] theory of signs, and the later Barthes, the poststructuralist who popularised the iconoclastic ideas such as “the death of the author.” Most of his ideas about Text are developed in his

[1] A Swiss linguist whose ideas on structure in language laid the foundation for much of the later, more developed critical theories of structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction.

poststructural phase, and they are mentioned in the essays "From Work to Text" and "The Death of the Author."

"From Work to Text", which was included in Barthes's *Image, Music, Text*, is one of the seminal attempts to define the concept of Text and its difference from the traditional concept of Work. "The Death of the Author" demonstrates a departure from Barthes's structuralist legacy, and liberates the Text from its authorial centre. While the former defines what Text is, the latter reminds the reader of the freedom of having infinite interpretations. Barthes argues that the reader becomes free of authorial hegemony with the metaphorical death of the author. He begins the first essay by mentioning the remarkable changes which have occurred in language and academic disciplines which have demolished the traditional notions of Work. He states that this rapture demands the need of a new object that is in opposition to the Work. This epistemological shift persuades him to focus on the phenomenon of Text, and he defines it in several ways. He is doing it in the negative way, that is, instead of saying what Text is he can be seen trying to explain what Text is not. In his words, Text is a methodological field while Work is a defined, concrete object which occupies a portion of the book space. While Work is a physical object held in hand, Text is an exercise in language unrestricted to genres which upsets the rules of hierarchy and rationality. Commenting on Barthes's views on Text, Robert Young vividly describes this difference: "The difference between the two can be conceived in terms of difference between a thing and a process, a product and productivity, signified and signifier, or 'truth' and 'play'" (31). Though the symbolism in Work comes to a halt, the Text functions in a way that's radically symbolic, and sometimes becomes paradoxical. The Text is plural and this plurality does not mean that it has several meanings, but that it achieves an irreducible plurality of meanings. Barthes here explains that etymologically *Text* means "a cloth" or *textus* from which text derives, and in this sense, Text can be understood as made of a plurality that depends on the stereographic plurality of the signifiers that weave it. The Text does not have any "grammar" but is woven with quotations, references, and echoes which can be called the codes of a cultural language. In "The Death of the Author" Barthes comments: "...a text is not a line or words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (1468).

In these two essays, Barthes specifies the removal of the author from the central position, and places the reader there. He comments that the reader is

born at the cost of the metaphorical death of the author, and he compares the reader to an idle subject. He poetically elaborates on the position of the reader:

> …this passably empty subject strolls—it is what happened to the author of these lines, then it was that he had a vivid idea of the Text—on the side of a valley, a *oued* flowing down below [...] what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives: lights, colours, vegetation, heat, air, slender explosions of noises, scant cries of birds, children's voices from over on the other side, passages, gestures, clothes of inhabitants near or far away [...]. So the Text: it can be it only in its difference. ("From Work to Text" 1472–73)

It confirms that the Text can be itself only in its difference which cannot be conceived as its individuality. The Text functions as a differentiated signifying system which produces an infinitude of interpretations.

Another character which Barthes attributes to Text is its intertextuality. He says: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text" ("From Work to Text" 1473). According to him, any text is an intertext which means that other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognizable forms. Though Barthes mentions the intertextual resonance in the text, it is to Julia Kristeva[2] we owe the principal theory of the concept of intertextuality. Barthes calls the intertextual elements in the text, "quotations without inverted commas" ("From Work to Text" 1473). Since plurality, whether it is linguistic or related to the occult (the presence of more than one spirit in one body), can be considered evil, the text is demonic due to its self-differentiation. He argues that the plural is directly at the heart of signifying practice in the form of contradiction. The weave of signifiers in the text reveals a complex network of signs where no sign is ever pure or fully meaningful. In short, the Text is composed of a web of signification and intertextuality without origin or destination.

Another characteristic of the Text which Barthes postulates in his essays is its filiation (or non-filiation). According to him, there is an owner and author in any Work who is also the father-figure. It is this figure who pronounces

[2] A Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic whose ideas became influential in contemporary critical analysis and cultural theory. She stands as a forefront structuralist with Barthes, Levi-Strauss and Lacan, in the time when structuralism held a major place in the humanities.

the ultimate meaning or the "truth" of a Work. But, the Text does not hold any father-figure since it does not align itself to any central, stable and authentic meaning. In a Text the author never comes back as the provider of real meaning, rather he may appear as a guest or a shaman whose mediation, not his genius, is admired. His signature is no longer privileged and paternal, and he becomes only a paper author.

A different quality Barthes attributes to Text is its transcending of the boundary between the cultural reading and the "casual reading in trains" ("From Work to Text" 1474). While a work functions as an object of consumption, text goes beyond this rule due to its polysemic deciphering potential. It reduces the gap between the acts of active writing and passive reading and demands the reader's active collaboration. This phenomenon is analogous to the act of playing a musical text. Barthes presents an analogy of musical text of previous ages when the acts of playing and listening are done simultaneously by the same person. Here, the duties of both a skilled interpreter and a casual music lover are invested in the same person. In the same way, both reading and writing are undifferentiated in the act of the reading of text. Robert Young names this phenomenon "productivity" and he explains: "The text is productivity. This does not mean that it is the product of a labour...but the very theatre of a production where the producer and reader of the text meet..." (36).

The final quality Barthes attributes on the concept of Text is about the pleasure a reader derives from the act of reading. Even though a Work produces pleasure, it is intimately and exclusively related to its author(s). The depressing realization that the work cannot be re-written will function here as a barrier in enjoying the pleasure totally. But at the same time, the Text offers pleasure without separation which can provide total enjoyment.

The second critic whose ideas about Text are discussed here is Jacques Derrida, one of the axial thinkers of poststructuralism. His name has become synonymous with deconstruction, a particular kind of practice in reading, and thereby a method of criticism and mode of analytical inquiry. It has been the most influential feature of poststructuralism on account of its radical subversion of the established notions of philosophy and literary criticism. Unlike Barthes's, Derrida's ideas about Text are not clearly explained in one or two essays. So, they are elicited from indirect sources which generally describe poststructural issues. However, the important works in which Derrida characterises the Text are "Living On", *Positions*, "Dissemination", "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", and *Of Grammatology*. As far as his ideas about text are

considered, it is necessary to understand the theoretical assumptions of structuralism and Derrida's modifications on it which are considered as poststructural. The *post* here means that poststructuralism depends upon structuralism as a prior system of analysis. Though Derrida agrees with the structuralists' argument of the arbitrariness of the relation between signifier and signified,[3] he rules out the stability of the fundamental structures within the system. In the same way, he denies structuralists' acceptance of binary opposition[4] as assisting in organising reality. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose work "Course in General Linguistics" is considered a corner stone of structuralism, argued that language is a system of differences. Derrida takes this concept of difference from Saussure and adds to it the dimension of temporality that Saussure's static structure does not allow. To mark the combination of such synchronic and diachronic[5] differences, Derrida introduced the portmanteau term *differance* which means 'to differ' and 'to defer' at the same time. Thus, Derrida defines the Text as a platform where infinite differing and deferring of meanings occur. He shows that a text, whether it is a poem, philosophical treatise or a critical exercise, can be read as expressing something that is quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may be read as carrying plurality of significance.

Agreeing with Barthes's notions, Derrida postulates that a text is something without margins, an author, a beginning and end, an overall unity and an identifiable content. In "Living On", he points out the characteristics of the traditional notion of the text: "If we are to approach [*aborder*] a text, for example, it must have a bord, an edge…" (67). He states that the traditional notion of the text has come to a total demolition after the theory of deconstruction. By disclosing the unstable nature of the centre, which determines the structurality of the structure, Derrida proves how structures lose totality and coherence. In his monumental essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida explains the centre's paradoxical positioning of being within and outside the structure. Later, he applies this idea of the "submerging" of the boundaries of the structure to

[3] Signifier and signified are the two inseparable components of a sign. While the former is the sound image or the marks on the page, the latter is the concept or the mental imprint of a linguistic sound.

[4] Two ideas, directly opposed, each of which we understand by means of its opposition to the other.

[5] Diachronic is concerned with the study of language or concepts on the basis of their historical changes. Synchronic is concerned with the study on the basis of their relationships at a particular point of time (Tyson 213).

the notion of the Text. In "Living On", he elaborates the problem of the traditional notion of the text and how it is demolished:

> The question of the text, as it has been elaborated and transformed in the last dozen or so years, has not merely "touched" "shore"…all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once though this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*de'bordemet*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a "text", of what I call a "text", for strategic reasons, in past- a "text" that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other different traces. (69)

Derrida's Text, which always overruns border, is a differential network that refers to other differential networks. Every border marks a difference, and by being all-inclusive the Text falls in an undifferentiated homogeneity which does not have an inside and outside. Perhaps, the most significant poststructural proposition pronounced by Derrida is concerned with this idea: "There is nothing outside of the text" (*Of Grammatology* 1825). When the margins are removed, the Text loses its totality and whatever things are positioned inside will be subjected to dissemination. Derrida vividly explains this idea in "Living On": "When a text quotes and requotes, with or without quotation marks, when it is written on the brink, you start, or indeed have already started, to lose your footing. You lose sight of any demarcation between a text and what is outside it" (67).

Moreover, Derrida's Text is a blending of counter-forces and infinite range of self-conflicting significations. It breaks all self-certifying and self-sufficient grounds and foundations, and formulates a "general text" which practically inscribes and overflows the limits of a discourse that is regulated by essence, meaning, truth, etc. He explains the phenomenon of "general text" in his *Positions*:

> …*there* is such a general text everywhere that this discourse and its order are overflowed, that is , everywhere that their authority is put back into the position of a *mark* in a chain that this authority intrinsically and illusorily believes it wishes to, and does in fact, govern. This general text is not limited to writings on the page. (60)

As far as literary criticism is concerned, these ideas of Derrida have been adopted to unravel the contradictions of a text. A text always exceeds the author's intentions due to its inherent instability of language. Literary criticism has traditionally been concerned with the interpretation of texts, with revealing the "meaning" behind the text. Now, the same is done based on Derrida's idea that every text hides something from the viewer. He comments in "Dissemination": "A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible" (1830).

The critics suggest that since Deconstruction distorts and contradicts the explicit logic systems of a text, the text may present an alternative logic which would be concealed otherwise. In other words, Deconstruction seeks to disclose the buried or unconscious text underneath the apparent one, and then show how this unconscious text subverts and contradicts that conscious one. Like Barthes, Derrida agrees that every text is a clash of metaphors, and it is intrinsically related to other texts. Each text is contaminated with other texts. He argues that culture and individuals are constructed through networks of affiliated language, symbols and discourse usages, and all of life is textual – a tissue of signifying relationships. No text, in his view, can be isolated from the constant circulation of meaning in the economy of the culture and so, they are connected to, and constituted through other texts.

A prominent poststructural critic whose ideas are imperative in defining the concept of text is the French theorist Michel Foucault. He has expressed his ideas about the text in his monumental essay entitled "What Is an Author?" The essay, which has similarity with Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" in several arguments and in its conclusion, was a successful attempt at disclosing the complex relationship between the author and text. Foucault begins the essay by describing two characteristics of the contemporary concept of writing. According to him, they are writing's paradoxical positioning "within but outside the text", and its relationship with death. Foucault admits that the modern critics have realized these qualities of writing. But, he argues that they will remain empty slogans if they cannot locate the space left empty by the disappearance of the author. Though Foucault does not name this place, we can infer this empty place as the Text. Like Barthes, Foucault can be seen trying to explain the metaphorical death of the author in a negative way. In other words, their attempts are to say what an author is not. Later, he can be seen using the same logic to explain what a Work is not. In this endeavour, Foucault goes to the grassroot level and analyses the problem with the concept of the author. According to him, the author, or the author-function lies between the poles of description and

designation. And, he deftly unveils the criteria on which the modern literary criticism defines the concept of the author. He summarises it as 1) the author as a constant level of value, 2) the author as a conceptual or theoretical coherence, 3) the author as a stylistic unity, and 4) the author as a historical figure who functions as a juncture of various events. According to these norms, the author should be a unity of writing, or the converging point where the differences emerging in a text – in themes, techniques and style – can be resolved. It is with the author that the contradictions of the Text are neutralised and the incomplete elements are tied together for conceptual coherence. Even though Foucault does not use the term 'Text', it can be speculated that the concept he tries to express is the poststructural text. His aim was to unveil the unstable, unreliable status of the Work and the author. But it can be inferred from this that what remains after this deconstruction is nothing but the ever-evolving, off-centred Text.

In my analysis of the cases of suicides, I find Foucault's explanations of the work and the author immensely useful. Adopting Foucauldian assumption, the author can be seen as the space that oscillates between the poles of description and designation. A study on the critiques of the cases of suicide will reveal, in this respect, that the majority of them have connected the author (here, the suicide) to either of these poles. Moreover, they can be seen adhering to their readings. So, considering suicide as Text will open the possibility of making a more comprehensive study which does not connect the author with these poles. Rather it will allow us to see him/her as a text which invites infinite readings among which none of them hold the stamp of authenticity. If suicide is seen as a Work, it must have a singular, authentic meaning which resolves all conflicts and contradictions in it. No ambivalence will be allowed on the Work and the author in such a reading. But, if Foucault's idea of the author is applied, the author loses his position as a coherent entity, and the Text will permit readings from various perspectives. In the same way, Foucault's disclosing of the contemporary literary criteria in defining the author is imperative in reading suicide as Text. The imposition of the supposed coherence on the author and the Work can be seen as an unfair critical exercise which has been practised for years. By unveiling this, Foucault frees the writer and the Work from critical confinements. In the case of suicide, it facilitates re-reading the cases of suicide and the rigid critical readings done on them. Once suicide is taken as Text, it cannot demand any adherence to certain established critical theories. Such a reading can simultaneously be a retrieval of the unheard and silenced voices of the author and the characters. Of course, such a view will invite an anarchic freedom of readings in the text. But, at the same time,

it is considerably emancipatory as far as the suppressed elements of the text are concerned.

Another theorist whose ideas about the Text are immensely useful for reading suicide as Text is Stanley Fish, the great exponent of reader-response criticism. His focus was on the process of reading a text rather than on the text itself. Though the critics of reader-response theory differ with regard to several assumptions, they agree with certain ideas about text. The most prominent among them is that the meanings of a text are the production or creation of the individual reader. They do agree that there is no inherent meaning for all readers in a text. Rather, the meaning is created as the result of the meeting between the printed text and the reader's anticipation of its sense which he derives from his previous experiences. Fish also focuses his attention on this interpretive value of literary texts. He rules out the formalistic belief that the text alone is the basic, knowable, neutral, and unchanging component of literary experience. One of his ideas which should be mentioned here is the concept of "Interpretive Communities." By this, Fish means the communities whose members share a particular reading strategy or set of community-assumptions to decipher a text. According to him, there is no purely individual subjective response, and all meanings are common to interpretive communities. In his view, it is the interpretive communities, rather than the text or the reader, which produce meanings. These interpretive strategies always result from various sorts of institutionalised assumptions about what makes a text and what meanings the readers are supposed to find in it. So, readers, who belong to a community (or several communities at the same time), approach the text with considerable commonality among them. Harold Aram Veeser explains Fish's idea vividly by ruling out the accusations against him: "Fish never denied that there is such a thing as getting text right, as Fish-bashers have taken him to be saying. His point, rather, is that getting texts right is a matter of negotiation within a community…" (38). Taking Fish's assumptions of text, it can be seen that the phenomenon of suicide has not been read as Text so far. The cases of suicide have always been read as a Work, which offers singular, valid meanings. No plurality of meaning was allowed in the critiques of suicides. According to Fish, there is no universal right reading of any text. In this respect, suicide can also be seen as a text which has infinite readings in it. These assumptions of Fish facilitate my re-reading the cases of suicide which have previously been read as Works which offered the so-called correct meanings. These singular readings, in Fish's language, can be considered the ones done by the critics who belonged to certain interpretive communities. And, so these readings can be seen as constructed by the strategies which belong to those communities. All of

these ideas point to the conclusion that Text (here, suicide) is a developmental field rather than a static entity, thereby permitting various readings.

A contemporary critical theory which adds some important ideas in the concept of Text is new historicism, a term coined by the reputed cultural critic Stephen Greenblatt. The new historical theory can be considered as a conglomeration of the ideas of Louis Althusser, a revisionist-Marxist thinker, Michel Foucault, and the concepts of Text of deconstructive criticism. The new historicists argue that it is wrong to view text as a trans-historical aesthetic realm, an entity that is independent of the economic, social, and political conditions which are specific to an era. They don't offer any privileged status to literary texts. Instead, they consider them as one of the several kinds of texts – religious, philosophical, legal, scientific and so on. Instead of studying a text in isolation, new historicists analyse the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations. They see a literary text as situated or embedded within social practices and discourses. According to them, the literary texts are constituted of the overall culture of a particular time and place. They (the new historicists) have redefined the notion of history and literature. They have focused on the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the verbal and the social, the text and the world. Perhaps, the most quoted explanation given to new historicism is that of Louis Montrose: "[It is] a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (qtd. in Abrams 183). By this statement, he means that history is not a stable account of facts, but a text which should be interpreted, and the texts are the verbal formations or the ideologies of the dominant class. In other words, they see texts as ideological products or cultural constructs. The new historical theorists rule out the autonomous existence of a text. According to them, texts do not have fixed meanings and coherent forms. On the contrary, they claim that texts consist of dissonant voices which function as the witnesses of the oppressive ideologies and subversive forces in a text. The expected aesthetic outcome as pleasure also can be considered as attempts by the author – knowingly or unknowingly – to camouflage the unresolved conflicts of power, class, gender etc. within the text.

Considering these theoretical premises of new historicism, the phenomenon of suicide can also be read as a Text. In this respect, little difference can be seen between the literary and non-literary texts. The boundary between them is permeable for interchanges of diverse elements and forces. There are continuous negotiations and exchanges between the texts which are both

literary and non-literary. According to Greenblatt, this exchange is mutually profitable for consumer capitalism and literary texts. Viewing suicide as Text will also be helpful, in this sense, to decipher the network of institutions and cultural power-relations absorbed in a text. According to Clifford Geertz, an eminent cultural anthropologist, the close reading of a particular social production or event will be helpful to recover the meanings it has for people, and to discover within the cultural system, the general pattern of conventions, codes and modes of thinking that invest the item with those meanings. Adopting the new historical argument that authors and critics are susceptible to the dominant ideology of a society, all readings can be considered only as interpretations rather than truths. Moving further with this logic, some of the critical readings can be considered as critical attempts to interpret – according to their cultural prepossessions – the text. So, in this regard, it can be argued that some of the previous critical readings of the cases of suicide are the appropriations done by the critics. And, a viewing of suicide as Text will naturally be a re-analysing, and the consequent disclosing of the oppressive ideologies and subversive forces lying hidden in the previous critiques done on it. In this sense, it makes possible a political reading which upholds a liberative agenda of emancipation of the marginalised and dispossessed.

The previous chapter defined the concept of suicide with a short description of its history, and we have defined the concept of Text in this chapter. Considering the title *Suicide as Text*, the next idea which should be explained is how suicide is read as Text. So, here, my attempt is to explain how the phenomenon of suicide is applied as Text. For the purpose, I think, it is necessary to recapitulate the notions of Text which are mentioned earlier. So, the notions about Text which are discussed here can be summarized under the following heads:

- Text is an endless play of signifiers which prevents a final meaning or "truth". It does not hold any author and authorial meaning.
- Text is unlimited, unrestricted to genres, and open to infinite interpretations.
- Text is a process, productivity, play and a methodological field which textualizes and analyses the signifying practices.
- Text is neither a work nor a series of works, neither present nor absent, neither in scripture nor in diction, and it is neither inside nor outside.

- References, citations and echoes in a text suggest the plurality of meaning. These untraceable references are the causes of the undecidability of the Text.
- There is nothing outside the Text. It overruns borders and margins, and refers to other texts, which creates a ceaseless meeting with other texts.

Considering these points, it can be noticed, first of all, that there is no demarcation between the literary and non-literary texts. John Frow rightly comments: "Texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms; out of the conventions of genre; out of styles and idioms embedded in the language; out of connotations and collocative sets; out of clichés, formulae, or proverbs; and out of other texts" (45). So, in this respect, it can be argued that suicide, a cultural phenomenon, can also be considered as a Text. In the wake of poststructuralism and deconstruction, the notion of the "limited text" is replaced by the general text which includes every field of reference. The general text is an endless series of relations, and the very idea approves the study of suicide as Text. Derrida's momentous poststructural proposition that there is nothing outside the text also can be used to prove that the phenomenon of suicide is one among the topics which is included in the general text.

One important use of seeing anything as Text is to liberate its reader from the Work's authorial hegemony. Once the authorial voice is removed, the text loses its centre and the subsequent centre-based reading. Barthes confirms this idea in his "The Death of the Author": "Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (469). Then, there will not be any transcendental signified in which the "truth" of the text is invested with. As any other sign, the centre too is susceptible to infinite differing and deferring, and thus, it will not be able to produce an ever-valid explanation. Rather, the meaning it offers will only be one interpretation among others. This revelation offers the text two kinds of freedom: 1) To deny the traditional centre-based meaning as the singular truth; and 2) To make possible a reading/interpretation from any perspective of the text which can be equally valid to that of centre-based reading. When suicide is considered as Text, it offers the reader the freedom to interpret the phenomenon from any angle.

Generally, as a social and cultural text, the reading of suicide manifests the contemporary dominant ideologies. It can be inferred that there should be a fixed centre if such a reading is to be made and maintained. And, as Derrida

opines, the centre should be stable and unfluctuating – both spatially and temporally – and stay within the Text to actualise such a reading. The centre will no longer be reliable once it is found that it is subjected to constant differing and deferring, and positions itself both within and outside the Text. This stance of the centre demolishes the solid nature of the Text, and simultaneously opens an opportunity to read it from several perspectives. Also, it opens itself up to infinite interpretations among which none can hold the stamp of truth. So, in this respect also, viewing suicide as Text facilitates the reader to interpret the text from perspectives which were previously considered unimportant and irrelevant.

Though the book is entitled *Suicide as Text*, I think, it would not be improper to extend it to "Suicide as Cultural Text." Using the concept of "Culture" in this way, it can be considered as an umbrella term which encompasses all human activities and relations which exist in various human groups. Here, culture is seen as a process and lived experience rather than a product or something with a fixed definition. Lois Tyson, a reputed contemporary critic, opines:

> A culture is a collection of interactive cultures, each of which is growing and changing, each of which is constructed at any given moment in time by the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual-orientation, socio-economic class, occupation, and similar factors that contribute to the experience of its members. (296)

Commenting on Barthes, Robert Young opined rightly that text is a productivity or the "very theatre of a production" (36). He elaborates by saying: "The text is a productivity…Even when written (fixed), it does not stop working, maintaining a process of production" (36). Considering this, suicide can be read as a cultural production which is determined by socio-political interests. And the deconstructive theorists assert that our experience of ourselves and our world, which is maintained through power relations or desire, is manifested in our language. This verbal manifestation is termed 'Discourse' in critical theory, which, in a sense, is supplementary or a substitution to text. In poststructural usage, the term designates all verbal constructions, and implies the transcending of the boundaries between literary and non-literary modes of signification. Considering this, it can be argued that viewing suicide as Text will be helpful to subvert the apparent meaning which is attributed to the work on account of the authorial intention of ideological necessities. At the same time, it also can be used to bring the suppressed elements in the text to light.

Every text is plural, and when we take suicide as Text, this plurality can be disclosed and have several readings in a single case itself. Barthes compares the text to a valley where nature and human beings coexist. Applying the same metaphor to the Text of suicide, it can be argued that it allows a reader to see a case of suicide from any perspective. The Text exists as a network of signifiers where no final and transcendental signified can be found. There is not any point where the signifier yields up to the truth of the signified since that signified is just another signifier in a moment of difference. This demonic plurality, as it is called by Barthes, can be seen as an emancipatory measure. It is so called because it brings fundamental changes to reading, and particularly where a reading on a singular logic is insisted. As far as suicide is concerned, the revealing and acceptance of the plurality in it will be manifested as a reading of the text from various paradigmatic perspectives.

Texts are platforms of aspects which are present and absent. There will be elements which are apparent or manifest and which are latent in a text. The idea of what should be present is determined by the socio-political power structures of domination, a critic's theoretical orientation, or the author's psycho-linguistic compulsions. Though some elements are apparently or superficially absent in the text, it can be said that they are not totally absent. They can be considered as absently present in the text. It reinforces the idea that a text hides something. Derrida identifies the absent presence of these paradigmatic elements in a text as an inevitable characteristic of a text: "A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the laws of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever, imperceptible" (*Dissemination* 1830).

Considering suicide as text, it can be said that each case of suicide will have elements which are made paradigmatic – stifled voices and suppressed presences – due to several reasons. So, viewing suicide as Text can make an opportunity for a reading from the perspective of these suppressed elements which can simultaneously have an emancipatory value.

Finally, it is an agreed poststructural argument that all texts are intertextual. This concept was originally introduced by Julia Kristeva and met with immediate success. According to her, "It has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work; it does, on the other hand, involve the components of a textual system" (15). This means that a text which is a trans-linguistic apparatus is a permutation of texts. In a similar sense, Silverman comments: "The text is off-centre, located where the intratextual meets the extratextual and dedefines its

borders" (84). Considering this characteristic of text, suicide, when seen as Text, can be taken as a blending of several utterances collected from other texts. It simultaneously makes possible a decoding and deciphering of these elements. It also facilitates a reading from the perspective of the elements which are subordinated and suppressed.

CHAPTER III

JOCASTA AND SEYMOUR

Suicide is one of the personal acts whose motive cannot be verified on the basis of the objective data. The preparation for this subjective action happens in the deepest recess of one's heart. Even the most scientific analysis with the help of the most effective theories and modern apparatuses may end up in a misunderstanding of such an act. Albert Camus identifies suicide as an act prepared with the silence of the heart like a great work of art. And he is right because almost always the common explanation given for suicide is wrong since its real motive remains vague, even for the person who commits it. And, there are instances, both in life and literature, where the "determining" person regrets his/her decision to die at the last moment or when the decision is irreversible. Anna in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* can be cited as an example of this. We see an Anna who is determined to commit suicide wholeheartedly: "…there in the very middle [of the railway cab] I will punish him [Vronsky, whom she felt responsible for her misery] and escape from everyone and myself", and it is the same Anna who becomes terror-stricken by her act and regrets, "Where am I? What am I doing? What for?" (ch. xxxi). A general assumption that the real motive of suicide cannot be deciphered objectively since all data are from without, and that any interpretation can be a misinterpretation is therefore feasible. So, following this logic, it can be said that the suicides of literary characters, as characters, are not in the control of the authors. They are elusive and any attempt to fix them in a single reading will end in executing an unfair critical exercise on the part of the critic. However, a viewing of suicide as Text does not inhibit the reader/critic from interpreting suicides, but prohibits them from adhering to certain principles. Moreover, a critique of a character will enrich our understanding of human nature. Considering this, in this chapter, I read the suicides of two literary characters by trying to avoid the pre-conceptions of them. It can be seen that these characters and their suicides have been interpreted a great deal by critics. Though my reading also presupposes a centre, my whole attempt is to show that any reading can have lacunae, and that there is no reading that can be called "final" and "real." So, at the same time, the chapter will serve two functions: unveiling the gaps in the previous

critiques done on these characters, and reminding us of the possibility of the infinitude of interpretations. For the purpose, I have taken two characters who share nothing except the very act of suicide in common. Moreover, they have dissimilarities between them. The first, Jocasta, is a character taken from the well-known Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, written by Sophocles. The other, Seymour Glass, is the protagonist of the Glass Stories written by J.D. Salinger. If the former is a minor character who goes into oblivion once her dramatic function is performed, the latter can be seen as exerting a haunting presence even after his death. And, if Jocasta was unnoticed by the critics in comparison with Oedipus, Seymour can be seen as having been interpreted too much. However, my endeavour is in a sense to "allow them to speak for themselves" rather than interpret them.

Jocasta 'Behind the Locked Doors'

"Her actual death
Was behind the locked door"
- Chorus in *Oedipus Rex*

The first character whom I analyse in this chapter is Jocasta, the 'infamous' mother/wife of Oedipus, the Greek hero who was destined to commit patricide and incest. Though Oedipus appears as the protagonist of plays written by Sophocles and other writers, it is *Oedipus Rex* (429 BC) translated to English as *Oedipus the King*- which narrates also the life and catastrophic suicide of Jocasta. So, this study focuses on Jocasta in general within the play and her suicide in particular.

Though the study focuses on Jocasta in *Oedipus the King*, it would be worthwhile to see how she is referred to in Greek mythology. Jocasta in *Oedipus the King* does not differ much from the Jocasta in other strands of Greek mythology. In both cases Jocasta was a daughter of Menoeceus and the Queen of Thebes who unknowingly married her son Oedipus. She lived as wife of both Laius and Oedipus. She was also the mother of four children from Oedipus named Antigone, Eteocles, Polynices and Ismene. Her first husband, King Laius of Thebes, consulted an oracle of Delphi when Jocasta was pregnant and was informed that the child was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. Alarmed by this, Laius ordered that the baby be deserted in the woods and pierced its legs. A shepherd takes pity on the child and he changes hands until being given eventually to the childless King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth, a neighbouring country of Thebes. Later, Oedipus kills Laius, not knowing who he was and marries Jocasta not knowing that she was his mother. At the end, when both realize who they

really are, Jocasta commits suicide by hanging herself and Oedipus blinds himself. According to some other versions, Jocasta had a necklace which could retain her youth. And, in *The Phoenician Women* (c. 409 BC) by Euripides,[1] Jocasta doesn't commit suicide until she witnesses the death of her sons Eteocles and Polynices who slew each other in a battle for Thebes. In this version, Jocasta commits suicide by stabbing herself in the throat with a sword.

As far as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is concerned, a superficial reading will not find any mystery or special relevance in Jocasta's suicide. It is rather an expected outcome of an individual who has encountered such a complex situation – being mother and wife to the same person. Moreover, it is documented in history that honour suicides were common in Greece in the olden times, and there were a good number of women among them. Considering this, Jocasta's suicide can be read as the anticipated reaction of a person on the sudden realization of her incestuous relationship with her own son. The situation was complex enough for the suicide, and her suicide fulfilled the demand for the dramatic effect of the play. Above all, it is clear that it is the story of the fate of Oedipus, his strengths and weaknesses, on whose name the play is entitled. Jocasta, though she is the one and only accomplice in the sinful incest, is only a supportive character. In all respects, it can be seen that Oedipus and his actions eclipse and undermine Jocasta in the play.

As far as the play is concerned, it can be noticed that not much is said of Jocasta and her suicide by Sophocles. Sophocles allows Oedipus to speak for himself and atone for his unknowingly committed parricide and incest in *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BC), the second play in the trilogy. If Oedipus appears as an ardent truth-seeker who digs through the graveyard of the unpleasant past in the first play, it is a soft-speaking, ground-touching old man at the mercy of his daughters and foreigners we see in the second play. Thus, Sophocles gives many opportunities to his wretched, god-forsaken hero to relieve himself from the burden of incest and patricide, which are invested in him for dramatic effect, and to reconcile himself with his sins and the reality of his destiny. In the final play, he can be seen disappearing to nowhere without leaving any footprints, which can be taken as his metaphorical disappearing without leaving any imprints of sin and

[1] Euripides (480–406 BC) was the contemporary and the last of the three great tragedians of classical Athens, the other two being Aeschylus and Sophocles. His famous tragedies include *Medea* (431 BC), *Hippolytus* (421 BC), *Electra* (420 BC), *The Trojan Women* (415 BC), and *Orestes* (408 BC).

suffering. At the same time, Jocasta, the alleged accomplice, is not given any opportunity to free herself from her guilty conscience and public shame. Simon Goldhill, an eminent scholar of Greek tragedy comments: "Oedipus...undergoes a reversal of an extreme nature: from Corinthian stranger to Theban citizen, but from first citizen to exile; from dispenser of justice to criminal; from clairvoyant and saviour of the city to blind riddle, bringer of plague to the city" (210). Of course, Oedipus was subjected to a catastrophic change, but I argue that he has also been given opportunity to atone for his fatal sins. Though he died blind and homeless, his death was honoured. At the same time, Jocasta, the partner in sin, is left to eternal infamy with an inerasable stain of incest. In a sense, it can be said that Jocasta "ends" with her suicide, and there was no question about her unawareness of the sin she had committed. I don't deny here the fact that there are arguments which question her "not knowing" of incest. But, my point is, why is Jocasta not allowed to relieve the burden of dramatically imposed incest while Oedipus, the accomplice in the sin, is allowed to do so? Moreover, she has no involvement in the other sin – the patricide – committed by Oedipus. Since her tragic suicide she has been standing in the dim light of theatre with the burden of abominable incest. So, my attempt, in this reading, is to bring out the other faces of Jocasta – that of a public woman of highest rank and a domesticated Greek woman – and reinterpret her suicide in the light of these new perspectives. In short, this study is an attempt to see the Jocasta behind the "dramatic costumes" and give her due opportunity to speak for herself.

Though many of my arguments move against the traditional reading of Jocasta's suicide, I do admit that even this reading must have had some aspects of 'truth' in it. So, it would be worthwhile to see the arguments of the assumed general reading before subverting them. In the general sense, Jocasta's suicide is seen as an individual's last means of escaping from her extreme guilty conscience created from the unknowingly committed incest with her son. Viewing events from this angle, it can be argued that what was done by Jocasta was something she could never voluntarily conceive of. She was sincere to her husband, the king Laius, and that is revealed in the last scene where she is reported as crying by calling his name:

> "...and we heard her shouting
> Something about Laius, her first husband,
> Who's been dead for years..." (51).

She became so repulsed when she knew the truth that Oedipus was her son, and she, as an individual who was ashamed and embarrassed, decided to

take her life. The intensity of her guilt is revealed in her cursing of the bed where she made love with both husband and son:

> "...She screamed,
> And beat upon the bed, where she had conceived
> A husband by husband, and children by child" (51).

Her pain was unbearable and led her to a state of madness, and she was found tearing at her hair. She was on the verge of madness, and her tearing of hair, which is often seen as a symbol of femininity, itself foreshadows her forthcoming suicide. Even though she loved life very much, the monstrous nature of the sin that enveloped her shocked her, and led her to the ultimate solution of self-annihilation. A viewing of Jocasta's life as portrayed by Sophocles in the play will show that she had never done any act that violated the then moral code. She was true to her husband, and her marriage to Oedipus was also an act that was done according to the prevailing social customs. She can also be seen showing great care and concern to Oedipus as her husband, and even the thought of incest was unbearable to her. She was also found praying for Oedipus at the altar of Apollo, the sun-god. So, in all respects, Jocasta can be considered the symbol of sincerity and purity who is comparable even to the ever-virtuous Penelope, and a perfect contrast to the adulterous Clytemnestra.

Though I agree with some of these arguments, I argue that this reading of Jocasta is too linear and does not hold water in several aspects. It is a fact that the objective of the play is to create a catharsis[2] in the audience by transferring the sufferings which Oedipus encounters, but it also should be noticed that the critics' treatment of Jocasta's suicide remains incomplete. Winnington has rightly commented: "Jocasta has not on the whole received very sympathetic treatment from critics" (180). Several lacunae can be found in this linear reading of Jocasta's life and suicide. So, my first attempt is to disclose the contradictory elements in the character of Jocasta, and then break the linear, singular reading done on her.

The first and foremost contradiction in the character of Jocasta is the co-existing of belief and non-belief in prophesies at the same time. She can be

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[2] Catharsis refers to a sudden emotional breakdown or climax that constitutes overwhelming feelings of great sorrow, pity, laughter or any change in emotion that results in the restoration, renewal and revitalization for living. In Greek drama it refers to the sensation of literary effect that would ideally overcome an audience and expurgate their baser emotions like pity and fear.

seen appearing simultaneously as a staunch devotee and an extreme atheist in the play. A detailed reading of the play will reveal several instances in which Jocasta rules out the authenticity of prophesies and foretelling. She can be seen comforting the disturbed Oedipus thorough her outright rejection of truth in prophesies:

> "...set your mind at rest.
> No one can forecast future" (31).

She denounces the oracle when she meets the messenger who comes with the news of the death of Polybus, Oedipus's "father":

> "Oh, oracles, dreamers of dreams,
> Fortune-tellers, where are your predictions now?" (39).

She even insults the prophets as "dreamers" and "fortune-tellers" and asks Oedipus:

> "...tell me what you think of Oracles
> With their mystification and mumbo-jumbo" (40).

and rules out the oracle's warning of a possible incest with mother by giving a psychological explanation to Oedipus:

> "...No one can predict
> The future...
> As for marrying your mother, you're not the first
> To have dreamed that dream; every son
> Is his mother's lover in imagination
> Or in day-dreams. It's commonplace.
> If a man broods on his most private fantasies
> His life won't be worth-living..." (41)

But the most curious thing is that it is the same woman who most convincingly rejects the validity of the prophecy on the basis of her "personal experience" (31), who undoubtedly believes the "unambiguous" (32) prophecy that her son would commit patricide. It should be specially noted here that even Laius got the news not from God but from his "mouthpiece" (31), the oracle. Since she reports that "An oracle told him [Laius]" (31), it can be guessed that she got the ominous prophecy about her child as "third-hand" information. Even then, she was ready to believe that prophecy and throw away her new born baby by piercing its ankles to ensure its death. It shows that her trust in prophecy was so strong that she never regrets that act, which is both gruesome and "unmotherly", in later life.

Besides, she, the disbeliever of prophecies, can be seen praying before the altar of Apollo to comfort the disturbed mind of Oedipus. Though I don't consider her a "terrible liar" as Art (4) argues, these instances can be shown to prove the inconsistency and contradiction in her character. So, at the most, I argue that she can be accused of manipulating the prophesies to settle mental disturbances and doubts.

Anthony Boyer takes a different stance and opines that Jocasta was only a scapegoat in the play to test Oedipus's faith in God and his oracles, in which he fails at the end. Boyer comments: "Jocasta is a victim in *Oedipus Rex*, but not as much as she is a catalyst for Oedipus' own victimisation" (2). He furthers his argument: "*Oedipus Rex* was Sophocles' attempt to show the Greeks that they could not avoid the dealing of the gods, or they may be forced to conspire against the very people they should love most. Jocasta was, in this way, a victim" (2).

However, the awareness of the contradiction in Jocasta's character is imperative in reading her suicide from the two different perspectives mentioned in this study. According to this, firstly, Jocasta's suicide can be read as the disastrous outcome of the conflict between public shame and private incest. This reading is based on the presupposition that there existed a schism in Jocasta between the public woman of the highest rank with a vulnerable reputation and an ordinary free individual with predictable emotions. Here, the reading is done from the angle of Jocasta, the Queen of Thebes. From this perspective, she can be seen as the queen of the deceased King Laius and the present King Oedipus. In both ways she was the first lady and the woman of highest reputation in the country. This reading focuses on the political interests of Jocasta in holding the power as the queen of a military state. In this way, it can be argued that even her first appearance in the play has its own significance. She enters the scene to settle the quarrel between her brother Creon, the one who holds an important political designation in the country and Oedipus, the king, on the responsibility of the murder of Laius, the previous king, and the subsequent famine in Thebes. Her eloquence is appreciative here, and she becomes successful up to an extent in reconciling the king and her brother. She becomes successful also in ruling out the doubts of a possible patricide from Oedipus's mind, and averts a potential domestic intrigue from Creon's side. Moreover, she appears practical enough to realize that the shepherd, eye-witness and reporter of the murder of Laius, cannot change his words publicly:

> "He [the shepherd] can't change his story now, he spoke
> In practice, the whole city heard him!" (36).

She can be seen doing everything to dissuade Oedipus from his search for the truth of his birth. She even shouts at him to call off the search:

> ".....Don't pursue it [the search]"
> "Listen, I'm begging you! Don't go on!" (44)

Here, some of her words can be cited as hints of her knowledge about the mystery behind his birth:

> "...If you want to stay alive
> This search must end"
>
> "I know! I know what I'm talking about
> I'm telling you this for your own good."
>
> "My god, you're doomed, you can't escape!
> I have one wish, [sic] and one wish only
> That you never discover who you really are" (44-45)

And, her last word can be cited as a hinting at her forthcoming suicide:

> "It's finished. No chance now. You're doomed
> I've said all there is to say:
> And my last word to you. Forever" (44-45).

Looking from this angle, it can be argued that Jocasta would even continue to live in an incestuous relationship as long as the general public did not find it out. In several contexts, she is found vehemently arguing against Oedipus's attempt to decipher the mystery, and she was even ready to deny the words of Tiresias, which she undoubtedly trusted previously. Winnington rightly comments: "In order to set the mind of Oedipus at rest, she must disparage the authority of Tiresias, and so she tells her husband of something that has long been in her mind" (180). Viewing Jocasta as a public woman for whom social and political reputation is a matter of greater importance than her personal affairs, her attempts to hide the unpleasant truth from the public implies her fear of losing this reputation. In short, she never wanted to be known as an accomplice to Oedipus in the sinful incest which had the potential to dispossess her power and position as the Queen of Thebes.

In a related reading, Artemis views Jocasta as a power-monger whose concern was more to do with political power than public shame. He argues that Jocasta must have known who Oedipus really was even in the very beginning, and it is due to her desire for power that she married him

knowing that he was her son. He opines: "...Jocasta, by marrying her son, remains queen, which is a position of power, as opposed to the dead king's wife, which is a position of little power" (4). Also, he argues that, in contrast to Creon's apparent passion for power, she was coldly and clandestinely calculating the aftermaths of bizarre events, and her suicide is the result of the awareness of the inevitable loss of power brought on by Oedipus's discovery of his origin. In a more rigorous reading Roberta Herndon portrays Jocasta as a highly egoistic woman who does not want to let the public know the lower origin of her husband. Oedipus had this fear and he can be seen asking:

> "...suppose it proved
> I was a born slave, from generations of slaves,
> Would that sicken you? Or affect your standing?" (44)

And he confirms it:

> "My wife is too proud of her blue blood.
> She's scared she may have married a slave!" (45)

Citing this, Herndon asks the vital, though sinister, rhetorical question:

> "Who would know one's personality better than their spouse?" (6)

Considering all these arguments, whether they are credible or far-fetched, if can be argued that Jocasta's real fear was not about the private incest but that of people's knowing of it, and the possibility of losing her position as the Queen of Thebes. She had done whatever she could do to avert the situation. And when she was convinced of losing her public reputation, she had no other choice but to commit suicide. So, from this angle, Jocasta's act of suicide can be read as a socially reputed lady's reactionary act at the knowledge that her much entertained fame is defamed forever.

Another reading, which is based on the unnoticed elements of the text of Jocasta's suicide, focuses on her being a domesticated Greek woman. A thorough reading on the play will show a Jocata who was not only the queen of two kings but also a down to earth woman. In this reading she has the portrait of an utterly feminine character who acts upon her impulses rather than her intellect. As any other ancient civilization, Greece was a patriarchal society where women were domesticated and denied administrative roles. Patriarchal power was manifested in all areas of society. As far as suicide is considered, there existed a custom of widow self-murder in ancient Greco-

Roman culture. Seymour Perlin, a famous suicidologist, states: "Another form of institutional suicide [in Greco-Roman culture] is the practice whereby a widow or a concubine offers her life when the husband or master dies" (6). This system, which is analogous to Sati, is itself the evidence of the domination of the patriarchal ideology and indoctrination of its values in Greco-Roman society, which includes Thebes. So, in light of this knowledge, it can be inferred that all women, irrespective of their rank, must have been demanded to be "homemakers" in Thebes. They must have been expected to live a life subordinated to men. In such a patriarchal society, women were to be trained and indoctrinated to be feeble-minded, emotional and family-oriented which is the dichotomous counterpart of the brave-hearted, intellectual and world-oriented man. Naturally, her attempts are directed at the welfare and integrity of the family. I think it would not be wrong to read Jocasta's life from this angle. Viewing it from this direction, it can be argued that, since the beginning of the play, her desire is to bring peace to the family. She appears on the stage for the first time to settle a quarrel between her husband and her brother. Rather than a political problem, she considers the issue a familial one. Going back to her life with Laius, Jocasta can be seen giving priority to bringing peace to the family rather than challenging the prophecy. She had motherly affection for her helpless child but she, as a helpless woman, had no choice but to agree with what was decided by her husband. Moreover, she herself was giving more importance to a peaceful life with her husband than living a risky life by challenging the oracle. Looking at the play from this angle, Jocasta cannot be accused much for throwing her baby to death by piercing its legs. We have already mentioned her contradictions regarding her belief in prophesies. While considering her as an ordinary woman, even this fluctuating nature can be pardoned. It is a fact that there are instances in which she goes against her beliefs and acts as a perfect opportunist. But it also should be mentioned that she always had a strong trust in God:

> "…why take notice
> Of these fortune-tellers and astrologers?
> The gods always get their own way
> Without anyone's help, when they are ready" (32).

She can be seen praying at the altar of Apollo to comfort her disturbed husband. Though she oscillates between belief and disbelief, it can be argued that she had a consistency beneath all inconsistencies and contradictions. The eternal consistency she possessed was her interest in maintaining a peaceful family. She was single minded and can be seen remaining optimistic at the very end of the catastrophe.

In the beginning of his monumental work, *The Antichrist*, Friedrich Nietzsche comments:

> "If you want peace of mind, believe,
> If you want to know truth, inquire."

Applying this norm to the characters of the play *Oedipus the King*, it can be argued in one sense that Jocasta follows the pattern of the former – the one who believes rather than inquires. Since the beginning she appears as a person who believes things for the goodness of the family. Her abandoning of her child who was prophesied as a potential patricide is a good instance for it. In this respect, it cannot be considered as a gruesome act but as only a necessary evil she took with pains. She was not feeling regret for this action because she must have felt that what she had done had brought comfort and security to the family, though it did not exist for long. Though she can be included in the first category of "believers", I argue that it would be wrong to define her as gullible or credulous. A detailed analysis of the play will reveal several instances where she acts as a highly logical person. She can be seen breaking all the arguments of Oedipus which present him as a parricide. Even she becomes successful in giving a psychological explanation for his fear of a possible incestuous relationship with his mother. As an eminent psychoanalyst she rules out his fear:

> "As for marrying your mother, you're not the first
> To have dreamed that dream; every son
> Is his mother's lover in imagination
> Or in day-dreams. It's commonplace.
> If a man broods on his most private fantasies
> His life won't be worth living…" (41)

Also, she cites the death of Polybus as the concrete evidence for her arguments, and becomes successful to an extent. But the same Jocasta can be seen praying to the "Brilliant god of sunlight and healing" (38) to help her because they "live in shadow of a curse" (38). This hints at her premonition of some "curse", something also apparent in her shouting at Oedipus at the end of the play which is followed by her exit from the scene:

> "…you can't escape!
> I have one wish, and one wish only
> That you never discover who you really are"
>
> "If you want to stay alive
> This search must end…" (44-45)

Her sudden and mysterious exit at the end of the play can be used as a supportive point for this argument. But it does not subvert her love for her husband(s) and children. A completely ignored aspect in Jocasta's character is her motherliness. In a related reading, Roberta Herndon argues that it was for her love, for her son, that Jocasta continued the incestuous relationship even after knowing about it. She argues:

> …the probability certainly exists that, at the time of their [Oedipus and Jocasta's] marriage, she was oblivious to the true identity of Oedipus. It shouldn't have taken her long, however, to see the scarring and swelling on his ankles. She obviously chose to say nothing about [it] and continue the incestuous relationship with him. The reason for this, however amoral and repugnant, could simply be that living with Oedipus in this way was her only option in being with her son again. (5)

Considering all these arguments, it can be said that Jocasta was a domesticated Greek woman also who found meaning for her life in a problem-free family. She was ready to believe anything for the happiness of the family though she was second to none as far as intelligence and logicality are concerned. She preferred a living as a faithful wife and a contented mother to a seeress who risks her peacefulness for the sake of truth. She was so life-affirmative that she followed its course of action whatever it was, incestuous or parricidal. Understanding her aims and limitation, she did everything possible to avert the catastrophe – the schism in the family – and when she felt helpless, she took the ultimate step. So, from all these arguments it can be concluded that Jocasta was a totally family-centred woman – one positioned between the superhuman and subhuman – whose suicide was nothing but a domesticated woman's final resort when she realized that her happiness was lost forever.

Exorcising Seymour

> *"Seymour once said, on the air, when he was eleven, that the* thing *he loved best in the Bible was the word WATCH!"*
> - Buddy Glass in "Seymour: An Introduction"

In the short story "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" we get the picture of Seymour more from the conversation between his anxious mother-in-law and his wife than from the narrator and himself. From their telephone conversation, it can be elicited at the most that Seymour is a thirty-one-year-old veteran who was in an army hospital for some time where he reportedly was having some abnormalities, though he cannot be called a raving maniac. In the story, he is vacationing down in Florida with his wife, Muriel. After

some funny and mysterious talk with a small girl at the beach, Seymour goes back to his room and shoots himself. The story, which offers only a vague picture of Seymour Glass, ends with his suicide: "…he took out an Ortgies calibre 7.65 automatic. He released the magazine, looked at it, then reinserted it. He cocked the piece. Then he went over and sat down on the unoccupied twin bed, looked at the girl, aimed the pistol, and fired a bullet through his right temple" ("A Perfect Day" 18). The reader gets confused about the motive of his suicide when the story ends. It is rightly commented on by *The New Yoker*: "It is a dark and an intricate introspection whose dramatic climax serves as a catapult rather than an ending" ("Dead Caulfields" 21). But the other stories in which Seymour is an important character, describe him in detail and in a different way. According to Buddy Glass, Seymour's younger brother and the narrator in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters", "Seymour: An Introduction" and perhaps in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", "he [Seymour] was a great many things to a great many people, and virtually all things to his brothers and sisters in our somewhat outsized family" ("An Introduction" 106). Buddy describes him as an unparalleled figure whom he even eulogizes: "…our blue-striped unicorn, our double lensed burning glass, our consultant genius, or portable conscience, our supercargo, and our one full poet…he was also our rather notorious 'mystic' and 'unbalanced' type" ("An Introduction" 106). And, Seymour, who remained a haunting influence even after his death, is portrayed by Zooey, his youngest brother as a "half-dead ghost."

Though there is much contradiction in the character of Seymour, he has been considered as a monolithic character by the critics. A thorough reading of the critiques will reveal that Seymour, both in terms of the suicide in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" and as the genius and the unbalanced type in the novellas, is defined and compartmentalised according to the theories of the critics. While Gwynn and Blotner read his suicide as the result of "sexual inadequacy" (qtd in Bryan 229), James E. Bryan sees precisely the opposite as the reason. According to him, "Seymour is depressed [which led to his suicide] by his own concupiscence and Muriel's sexual hold upon him" (229). Warren French, in his reply to Bryan, takes a different position and sees Seymour's suicide as a dropping of life altogether at the realization that it is better than equating life with the so called good and bad. He explains it thus: "Seymour shoots himself at precisely the moment when he learns to drop life altogether rather than to drive himself to live a 'bad' life (presumably epitomized by his wife and mother-in-law) or equate it with 'good' (possibly suggested by Sybil)" (563). From a Zen Buddhist perspective, Sanford Goldstein describes Seymour as, "The enlightened

man rejected by the non-enlightened world", and his suicide as a fleeing from it.

As even the critics are exclusionary, an unbiased reading cannot be expected from a common reader. So, there is an infinitude of interpretations on Seymour's suicide among which some are even far-fetched and unjustifiable. These far-fetched attributions range from portraying his wife as wholly responsible for it and seeing him as a raving maniac to viewing him as a *Mukta*, as enlightened. However, an overall reading of these critical and general assumptions on Seymour's suicide can be seen to confine him in dichotomous binaries such as schizoid/genius, mystic/selfish and introvert/social, among others. The problem with these readings is not their difference in viewpoints but their total negation of or hesitation in undertaking a detailed reading of Seymour's life as a whole by accepting him as he is. Even though several reasons are given for Seymour's suicide, a diligent reader can find several lacunae and self-contradictory arguments among them. And, it is a fact that many readers are doubtful about the explanations provided by these reputed critics. Despite the explanations, it can be seen that Seymour and his suicide remain mysterious. Even Buddy, Salinger's alter-ego who made the greatest attempt to decipher the mystery of Seymour's suicide, admits: "At any rate, his [Seymour's] character lends itself to no legitimate sort of narrative compactness that *I* know of" (An Introduction 106). Besides, the parochial studies can be seen accusing other characters as responsible for his catastrophic action. To be specific, it is Muriel Fedder, Seymour's wife, who is accused unfairly of being responsible for his suicide. Not only many general readers but also many critics believe that Muriel's attitude is responsible, in a way, for the suicide of Seymour. She is also blamed for her alleged denial of her wifely concern for her "troubled" husband. According to Gail Jarvis, "He [Seymour] feels that he is married to an insensitive, materialistic woman whom he calls 'Miss Spiritual Tramp of 1948.'" In a similar tone, Daniel Moran argues: "She apparently was not interested enough in Seymour's troubles to pursue a conversation with a psychiatrist staying in the hotel. She complains about her sunburn as if that were worse than the unspecified troubles afflicting her husband." Readings like this can be seen as indirectly hinting at Muriel's responsibility in Seymour's suicide.

However, it is a fact that there are lacunae in the arguments of the reputed critics. Also, it can be seen that the general assumptions in this case are too linear and imposing. These two points draw my attention to attempt a study on Seymour's suicide by considering it as a Text. Also, even after a considerable effort to pigeonhole Seymour as someone who is afraid of the

sexual snares of Muriel, Bryan admits: "We cannot even be sure what suicide did for him [Seymour]" (229). This confession also persuades me to venture into a re-reading of Seymour which may dismantle several existing critical contributions. I argue that the early mentioned readings on Seymour can be done only if the phenomenon of suicide is considered as a Work, a finished idea with a fixed meaning. Here I would like to see the suicide of Seymour as a Text, a process which allows an infinitude of interpretations. The Text works tirelessly by demolishing all centre-based readings. It also holds the poststructural assumption that no text can mean what it seems to say. So, my endeavour in this study is to break the linear readings of Seymour's suicide. Simultaneously, it will reveal the invisible Seymours who are silenced as the result of the authorial readings. In short, my attempt is to perform an "exorcism" on Seymour of the authorial readings done so far so that the super-human and subhuman elements attributed to him can be expelled. Anyhow, I admit that, even after this deconstructive reading, I cannot occupy Seymour in a fixed position between superhuman and subhuman. All I can do is indicate the undecidability of Seymour's suicide. It will remain a Text susceptible to an infinitude of interpretations. Consequently, the approach may function as a liberative measure from the authorial hegemony of the centre-based reading.

An a priori assumption which should be examined in this respect is the identification between the Seymour, eldest of the exceptionally intelligent Glass children, who is described at length by his brother in novellas, and the one who committed suicide while vacationing down at Florida with his wife. Of course, it is a fact that several apparent details such as the names of the protagonists and the other characters, their interests and relations to one another, and their attitudes to life are similar in these works. But a close reading will reveal that there is no concrete evidence to prove the existence of a unified Seymour. They, the Seymours who appear in different stories, have many differences in their characters. As far as "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is concerned, it can be seen that there is no reference to Seymour's relation to the Glass family other than his name. In other words, the veteran with a considerable indifference to his wife and certain uninhibited characteristics has little to do with the patient, understanding and loveable Seymour whom we see in the other stories. Seymour's reluctance to even to talk about his wife in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" does not match with Seymour's happiness in being with his wife in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters." If Seymour in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" openly admits: "How beautiful it is to see her [Muriel] laugh. Oh, God, I'm so happy with her" (71), we see a totally different Seymour who hesitates to say anything about his wife in "A Perfect Day for

Bananafish": "Ask me something else, Sybil" (12). Viewing things from this angle, even his last glance at his sleeping wife can also be read as the sign of the utmost indifference towards her. Though it can be argued that his discord might have emerged only after their marriage, indeed as the result of the marriage, this argument cannot rule out all discrepancies in his behaviour, and cannot offer a satisfactory explanation for his sea change. All this hints at the existence of two Seymours, and Sindhu Menon rightly comments: "These two Seymours however, though they share the same name and commit the same act of suicide are not really identical. The Seymour in the short story is more of a 'person' while in his later appearances; he is more of an idea, an idealized personification" (294). However, I myself take "anticipatory bail" for my arguments in which I consider the two Seymours as identical to construct or refute argument. They should be considered here as a necessary evil taken to refute linear and hegemonic readings which cannot be done otherwise. So, as mentioned earlier, my attempt in this study is to disclose the lacunae in the reasons previously attributed to Seymour's suicide by the critics. At the same time, the act of unveiling the gaps itself will function as a reading that is freer than the previous ones. However, I don't claim that my endeavour can create a totally unbiased reading which is only a myth in the deconstructive process. So, my attempt, at the most, can be seen as aiming to demolish rather than create an agenda. I agree with the idea that any commentary itself becomes a Text which holds an infinitude of interpretation. In a sense, this iconoclastic reading can be compared to the very mystery of Seymour's suicide. I take Carey Wallace's words to express it: "Why does Seymour pull the trigger on returning to his room? [...] Instead of providing easy answers, it raises [questions], and refuses to answer..."

An overall reading of the criticism on Seymour's suicide will show that it is towards his wife all the accusing fingers point. Except a few, all critiques on Seymour's suicide target Muriel as the sole reason of his premature death. She has been qualified with negative epithets such as "superficial", "materialistic", "insensitive" and "shallow." It is also interesting to note that Seymour, who has been idolized by critics, is attributed with these terms' antonyms: "spiritual", "sensitive", "mystical" and "insightful." This binary opposition itself hints at their interdependencies and the privilege of the latter (here Seymour's qualities) over the former. So, I think it would not be wrong to doubt the validity of the negative qualities attributed to Muriel.

Supporting these qualifying terms, critics have produced their own evidence which considers Muriel as seriously responsible for Seymour's suicide. Jurek Smiz comments: "His wife was too preoccupied with backbiting

others to notice that her husband is a human being who could not conform to her spiritual emptiness." In a similar way Bryan argues: "Seymour sees his marriage to worldly Muriel Fedder as a bridge back to the mundanity of the world which, as a poet, he has rejected" (228). Even her name is read as one related to materiality: "...Muriel's name both looks and sounds like the word 'material.' This could possibly symbolize that she, like her mother, is shallow, fashion-conscious, and unwilling to learn German in order to read delicate, world-weary poets like Rilke." However, the most rigorous criticism is from Gail Jarvis who accuses her by using the previously mentioned dichotomous binary: "He [Seymour] feels that he is married to an insensitive, materialistic woman whom he calls 'Miss. Spiritual Tramp of 1948.' He is thoroughly frustrated with his life and his behaviour becomes more and more bizarre until one afternoon he commits suicide."

In the same way, there are milder accusations which consider Muriel as indirectly and unknowingly being responsible for Seymour's death. Kenneth Hamilton comes up with a different argument according to which Seymour kills himself for Muriel's sake, and that his suicide is, "his way of allowing the true Muriel to escape from the banana hole where she has become trapped through her attitude to marriage." To Hamilton, Seymour "dies physically in order that she [Muriel] may again live spiritually." And, in a slightly different way Warren French writes that Seymour is not disturbed by "the insufficiently appreciative Muriel" as much as with himself for "succumbing to materialistic temptations." However, a thorough reading of Seymour's life and suicide will reveal that these readings, though they hold appreciative insights, have several inherent contradictions among them. The most important argument I put forward here is that Seymour's attitude towards Muriel has never been a consistent one. He can be seen holding an ambivalent attitude rather than a permanent contempt towards her. Of course, Seymour and Muriel were incompatible, and there are enough instances for it in "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters": "Even in the dark, I could sense that she felt the usual estrangement from me when I don't automatically love what she loves" (67); "[Muriel] loves me, but she'll never feel really close to me, *familiar* with me, *frivolous* with me, till I'm slightly overhauled" (75); and "But on the whole, I don't make her happy. Oh, God help me" (71). These comments can be seen as the examples of their difference of interest and attitudes. Despite seeming a little disappointed in her attitude in general, however, he can never be seen moving a level deeper towards contempt in the novellas. Moreover, certain comments of him about their relationship, or rather his relationship with her, can be seen as neutralizing his negative feelings towards her. There are several examples for his love and joy in being with her: "How beautiful it

is to see her laugh. Oh, God, I'm so happy with her" ("Raise High" 71), or "How I worship her simplicity, her terrible honesty. How I rely on it" ("Raise High" 73). And, he gives us enough proof to argue that he was even dreaming of raising their children: "Marriage partners are to serve each other...Raise their children honourably, lovingly, and with detachment...the joy of responsibility for the first time in life" ("Raise High" 91). But contrary to this, we see a different Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" who even refuses to talk about his wife: "This is hard to say, Sybil. She may be in any one of a thousand places. At the hairdressers. Having her hair dyed mink. Or making dolls for poor children, in her room...Ask me something else, Sybil" (12). Examining Seymour's relationship with Muriel in depth, it can be seen that they had different areas of interest from which communication was hardly possible. They are different in their ideas about love also. It can be seen that while Muriel worried about the incomprehensive nature of love, Seymour simply observed its ambivalent nature. Muriel always doubted the love which was not pleasurable always. But, in this respect too Seymour is not consistent, and we see a hesitant, impatient and indifferent Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish." Viewing him from this angle, Seymour's final glance at his sleeping wife can also be deciphered as one more of contempt than of pity.

It should be mentioned here that there is a striking similarity between Seymour and his youngest sister Franny in their relationship with their partners. They have an ambivalent love/tolerance attitude towards their partners, and their real similarity lies in their immediate awareness of the phenomenon. There is an incident that describes Franny's attitude which can be compared to that of her brother's in *Franny and Zooey*: "Oh, it's lovely to see you! [Lane, her lover]. Franny said as the car moved off. "I've missed you." The words were no sooner out than she realized that she did not mean them at all" (10).

In short, it can be said that Seymour never had a permanent hatred towards Muriel and he never felt her interests and views to be despicable. Rather, he understood them as different from his ideas. However, it is also true that Seymour can never be considered as a misogynist since he even once stated about Mrs Fedder, a person of exactly opposite nature to him: "I love her. I find her unimaginably brave" ("Raise High" 72). As far as Muriel is concerned, an important but generally unnoticed incident that should be mentioned here is Seymour's mysterious relation with Charlotte Mayhew, the noisy girl among the "It's a Wise Child" team who later became a famous actress-singer. Seymour is reported to have had a mysterious

submissiveness to her during their "It's a Wise Child" days. Buddy reports that it was Seymour who introduced her to the programme, and was very close to her so that he even endured pain inflicted by her on him. Buddy says: "On certain nights when he was in especially good form, Seymour used to come home with a slight limp...Charlotte didn't step on his foot, she tramped on it. He didn't care...He loved noisy girls" ("Raise High" 81). Besides, it can be seen that, according to Mrs Silsburn and the Lieutenant, Muriel looked exactly like Charlotte: "'Well, all right, just take my word.' Mrs. Silsburn tapped the photograph impressively with index finger. 'This child could *double* for Muriel at that age...'" ("Raise High" 83). There is also the mentioning of the name Sharon Lipschutz that reminded Seymour of another name. In this respect, I think it would not be wrong to speculate Charlotte as the evoked name. Considering these instances, it can be argued that Seymour always had a relation akin to love for Charlotte. And, following this logic, he can be accused of trying to mould a Charlotte out of Muriel. If so, it can be said that Muriel's individuality, even if mundane or shallow, had never been accepted by Seymour as such. Rather, a character that was not hers was expected from her. Such a reading can unburden Muriel from much of the accusations against her, like her "misunderstandings" of her husband. And, moreover, she will be worthy of getting our sympathy as a woman who was expected to live a life that was not hers.

These arguments can be seen as unburdening Muriel of many of the negative qualities attributed to her. And, finally, a deeper analysis can bring out the unnoticed merits of Muriel even from "A Perfect Day for Bananafish", which is mainly used for criticising her. This quotation of Carey Wallace's is clearer than a book of criticism on this issue:

> Despite her [Muriel] concern with surfaces, she shows some spark of her own...Muriel is capable of loyalty and steadfastness: her mother reveals that Muriel waited for Seymour all through the war, while other women were less faithful to their husbands. And, unlike her mother, Muriel seems largely unruffled by Seymour's implied shenanigans: it may not be exactly appropriate, but her response to Seymour's nicknaming her "Miss Spiritual Tramp 1948" is a giggle, not a display of wounded vanity. Several times she defends Seymour against her mother's fears, and she declares that she herself is not afraid of him.

Another attribution of Seymour that is analysed and deconstructed in this study is the reading of him as an enlightened mystic, to be specific, a Zen

mystic who has reached the state of Nirvana.[3] As a corollary to this, there is another reading which sees him as a schizoid,[4] whose actions, including the final one, are those of a mentally deranged person. My attempt here is to find lacunae in this linear reading and prove the undecidable position of Seymour and his suicide. Revealing his elusive stance itself has a liberative value, and it will simultaneously make more reading(s) possible. This proving of the inherent plurality will function with a retrospective logic and prove that Seymour's life and suicide are better referred to as a Text than a Work.

The first reading here I would like to analyse is the one which considers him a schizoid, a victim of Schizoid Personality Disorder. There are instances like Seymour's premature (or so Mrs Fedder thinks) discharge from an army mental hospital which are used by the critics as supportive points to this argument. However, considering the characters of the stories, it can be seen that the prototypical reading of Seymour as a psychotic in general and a schizoid in particular is influenced by his mother-in-law. Mrs Fedder, who has been known as "psychoanalysed herself for years" ("Raise High" 36) was reported to have commented: "...this Seymour was really [a] schizoid personality" ("Raise High" 37). In another instance, Seymour himself writes: "Her [Muriel's] mother thinks I'm a schizoid personality" ("Raise High" 70). Mrs Fedder sees Seymour's "funny business with trees", "that business with the window", "those horrible things he said to Granny about her plans for passing away" and "what he did with all those lovely pictures from Bermuda" ("A Perfect Day" 5-6) as the acts of a mentally deviant person. Though what Seymour did with the trees is not clear, Bryan interprets it as a psychological problem: "Seymour's psychotic urge to knock down trees does not seem a frustration of impotence but rather a manifestation of his struggle to transcend sex entirely" (229). Mrs Fedder believed it a perfect crime that the army hospital released Seymour prematurely. Also, she fears that Seymour may completely lose control of himself. And, though ironically, Seymour himself gives some reasons for which he was called a schizoid by her: "One, I withdrew from and fail to relate to people. Two, apparently there is something 'wrong' with me

[3] The Buddhist term for perfect blessedness achieved by the extinction of individual existence and by the absorption of the soul into the supreme spirit, or by the extinction of all desires and passions.

[4] A personality disorder characterised by a lack of interest in social relationships, a tendency towards a solitary lifestyle, secretiveness, emotional coldness, reduced affection, preoccupation with introspection, lack of desire, and limited capacity to express emotions, among other traits.

because I haven't seduced Muriel. Three, evidently Mrs. Fedder has been haunted for days by my remark at dinner one night that I'd like to be a dead cat" ("Raise High" 70). Many of these self-accepted accusations can be successfully refuted by Buddy, Seymour's younger brother in the novellas. He defends them by stating Seymour's dislike of being an exhibitionist and a high I.Q show off. He was well-connected to people. Another assumption, that he is a latent homosexual (disregarding the erroneous notion that homosexuality is a mental disorder), is pointless since it does not have the slightest evidence in support of it. The third supposed reason, Seymour's wish to be a dead cat, can be explained by seeing it in a mystical dimension. Seymour himself considered this comment a "deadly serious" one ("Raise High" 70), and so, from a mystical perspective, can be viewed as his desire to become a mystical "nobody" or a man on whom no ideology is imposed. From such a mystical angle, Seymour's "funny business with trees" can also be read as a spiritually interested person's feeling of synchronicity with everything, including inanimate things, in nature. We can find similar instances from the novellas for his interest to see the subtle in the gross and being in tune with everything in the world. Buddy describes one incident:

> My brother [Seymour], for the record, had a distracting habit, most of his adult life, of investigating loaded ashtrays with his index finger, clearing all cigarette ends to the sides – smiling ear to ear as he did it as if he expected to see Christ himself curled up cherubically in the middle, and he never looked disappointed. (*An Introduction* 108)

Seymour's reasons to postpone his arranged wedding is another issue that was used by the critics to hint at his abnormality. But Seymour has his own explanation for this act and his reason cannot be totally ruled out. He states that he was feeling ecstatic even at the thought of getting married, and he wanted the marriage postponed till he felt less happy. Another so called abnormal act of Seymour in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" is his ceaseless playing of piano for the last two nights at the hotel. Considering Seymour's interest in Zen Buddhism, this can be read as an act which is similar to the ceaseless painting of Zen artists for days.[5] In a different way, his insistence on Muriel's learning of German which is despised by Mrs Fedder as "awful" and "sad" ("A Perfect Day" 6) can be seen as illogical but not abnormal. By saying so it can be argued that Seymour must have been expecting a not-so-difficult task for the precocious and prodigious Glass children from the not-

[5] Zen says that when one is fully aware of one's Buddha nature, any activity will become spontaneous and effortless. It is as if the body executes the difficult task effortlessly and consciously.

so-intelligent Muriel. In this respect, it would be better to see this act as one of illogicality than of abnormality.

Considering all these arguments, it can be said that psychological explanations are hardly enough to define Seymour's suicide. After all, he is a person who was psychoanalysed and discharged from army mental hospital as "cured" (though Mrs Fedder denies it). However, a diligent reader can speculate the "success" of psychoanalysis on Seymour and his suicide from the ironical comment of Zooey: "If she [Franny] got somebody terribly Freudian, or terribly eclectic, or just terribly run-of-the-mill-...she'd come out of analysis in even worse shape than Seymour did" (*Franny and Zooey* 109). Going through the critical comments on Seymour, it can be noticed that the most usual attribution to him is that he was a pure mystic, and his suicide is an esoteric act of a *Mukta*, an enlightened being. He is considered a person who can see the reality beneath the superfluous life. The critics have infused clairvoyance in him and he is qualified as the one who can "see more". Jurek Smiz argues: "He [Seymour] is on a quest to become free from all of the suffering in his life. For Seymour attaining nirvana may only be accomplished by committing suicide." Critics Bernice and Sanford Goldstein describe Seymour as "the enlightened man rejected by the non-enlightened world." However, I would like to emphasize here that I don't deny Seymour's mystical inclination totally. Neither do I attempt to state that he was a complete mystic who had reached the state of permanent bliss. A thorough reading of the stories will reveal that Seymour had a considerable interest in Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Vedanta Philosophy. "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" even begins with Seymour's reading of an esoteric/mystical Taoist parable to silence his ten-month-old sister, Franny. There are several examples in the novellas and the story which can be used to show his mystical propensity. His so-called funny business with trees and ceaseless piano playing are already mentioned as mystical acts. Similarly, his coinage of the word Bananafish can be seen as a Zen *koan*[6] created by him. Though several meanings are given for Bananafish, such as a "contemporary man who, blinded with his greed, forgets about the essential", "...all people (in their fallen state) who gorge themselves so much with sensory delights..." and "a surfeiting with corrupt adult experience, a 'tragic life' of biological gorging at the expense of the soul" (Bryan 229), and for Seymour himself, it still remains elusive as a *koan*. In another instance, Seymour, the mystically inspired man seems

[6] A *koan* is a story, dialogue, question or statement used in Zen Buddhism containing aspects that are inaccessible to rational understanding, yet accessible and spiritually vital to intuition.

bewailing: “The human voice conspires to desecrate everything on earth” (Raise High 69). The incident of marble-shooting which is mentioned in “Seymour: An Introduction” can be shown as a good example of Seymour’s mystical awareness of Reality in depth. His advice to not to aim too much and his awareness that hitting by aiming is a matter of luck are closely related to the esoteric philosophy of Zen Archery: aiming but no aiming.[7] It also may be read as advice from a man with good awareness who has realized the Zen principle of the pathless path or the Indian Karma Yoga principle of acting without expecting the result.

However, there are several incidents which cannot be explained from the mystical perspectives in Seymour’s life. The most prominent among them is Seymour’s injuring of Charlotte with a stone which resulted in a serious wound. Buddy describes this incident in “Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters”: “What happened was, she [Charlotte] sat down in the middle of our driveway one morning to pet Boo Boo’s cat, and Seymour threw a stone at her...He threw it at her because she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo’s cat” (89). None of the mystical explanations can be seen as satisfactory here to decipher Seymour’s motive behind this act. And, the reader, similarly to the Glass children and Charlotte, never understands why Seymour, the calm and collected person, did this. At most, it can be read as Seymour’s inability to observe the perfection of anything at ease since Charlotte appeared as the manifestation of the perfection of beauty. Another mystically undecipherable incident is Seymour’s unnecessary outburst at the woman in the elevator at the hotel in “A Perfect Day for Bananafish.” He was accusing the woman of staring at his normal feet, which the context proves as an utterly false accusation. In psychology, similar kinds of feelings of being watched are included in the category of the neurotic disorder called paranoia.[8]

Considering all these constructive, deconstructive and reconstructive arguments about Seymour’s life and suicide, it can be said that he has not been accepted totally with all his strength and frailties by the critics. Also,

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[7] According to the philosophy of Zen Archery the archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull’s eye that confronts him. This state of unconsciousness is realised only when the archer is completely rid of the self and he/she gets involved in the perfecting of the technical skill.

[8] Paranoia is a disturbed thought process characterized by excessive anxiety or fear, often to the point of irrationality and delusion. Paranoid thinking typically includes persecutory beliefs concerning a perceived threat.

as a corollary to this, the people who are intimately related to Seymour can be seen as parochially interpreted. As we have seen earlier, Muriel, his fiancée and wife in the novellas and the short story respectively is the person who was subjected to the severest misinterpretation, resulting in a marginalisation. The viewing of Seymour as spiritual consequently has become the viewing of Muriel as worldly, which is not always right. She, whom once Seymour addressed as "My precious girl" ("Raise High" 68) was even branded as a fetter that bound Seymour, the "mystic" to the material world. It can be seen that the majority of the critics have neglected Seymour's love for her and his joy in being with her. So, it can be said in this respect that Seymour and his acts are read by critics according to their preconceived ideas. Even Buddy can be included in this group while he eulogizes Seymour: "I haven't come to bury but to exhume, most likely, to praise..." ("An Introduction" 108). On the other hand, Mrs Fedder brands Seymour as a schizoid and homosexual. As far as the family members are concerned, Seymour was an inimitable and inaccessible icon for them. He was considered the touchstone for their morality and spirituality. He was so idolized by them that he could not be accepted as a man of flesh and blood –with his own faults and drawbacks. Sindhu Menon rightly comments: "Seymour is a symbol, a signifier for them...Seymour, then, has to be viewed [as] more of a projected image than a concrete character" (246). Here, we can argue that a non-concrete character, one that is undecidable and ambiguous, cannot be a "real" character. This hints at the possibility of different readings on him. However, numerous critical attempts to define his motive behind the suicide have also been made. Where Jurek Smiz reads it as a means to attain nirvana, Bryan sees it as an escape from the corrupted adult experience. Buddy Glass for his part reads it as an action of a true-artist seer: "I say that the true artist seer, the heavenly fool who can stand and does produce beauty, is mainly dazzled to death by his own scruples, the blinding shapes and colours of his own sacred human conscience" ("An Introduction" 105). In a totally different tone, Carey Wallace suspects a strange motive: "And very deep, perhaps entirely buried in the text, lies a fear that he may, in fact, be insane; and finding someone to share his vision would entail dragging him/her with him to insanity."

However, all these readings can be seen as one-sided and not reading Seymour in his totality. It seems that the one and only character who accepts Seymour as indivisible is his youngest brother Zooey. In this respect, it can be seen as right what Walker, another brother of Seymour, says: "You [Zooey] were the only one who was bitter about S's suicide and only one who really forgave him" (*Franny and Zooey* 68). It shows that he must have understood Seymour's, indeed any suicide's, indivisible individuality as

such. So, it can be argued that he is the only one among the Glass children who has not indulged in the mental cannibalism that is done on Seymour. He even shouts: "Seymour, Seymour *Seymour*...I'm sick of their names I could cut my throat...This whole goddam house stinks of ghosts" (*Franny and Zooey* 102). This is perfectly commented on by Ihab Hassan: "Zooey heralds both the defeat and apotheosis of Seymour: defeat because the youngest of the Glass children has at least achieved a measure of independence from the guru of the house, and apotheosis because this is precisely what Seymour would have wished."

However, after going through all these arguments, it can be seen that Seymour and his suicide cannot be confined within any one-sided theories. He stands beyond all categorizations and dichotomous binaries as the concept of textuality itself. He is neither a total schizoid nor a complete mystic, or he is both and more. Neither psychological aberration nor spiritual insight were his reasons for suicide, or both are his reasons. In "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters" Salinger describes a system in Zen monasteries and this can be used as an analogy in Seymour's case: "In certain Zen monasteries, it is a cardinal rule...when a monk calls out 'Hi!' to another monk; the latter must call back 'Hi!' without thinking" (46). In a symbolic way, Seymour's ambiguous and elusive suicide can be read as a "Hi" response to the call of death without "thinking" – a decision taken neither by the logical mind nor by the feeling heart.

CHAPTER IV

NANDITHA AND SHALVY

This chapter deals with suicides of two writers, Nanditha and Shalvy, for whom I have to visit Malayalam literature where there is almost a superfluity of choice. A survey on the history of suicide will reveal that many readings have been done on writers who killed themselves. A striking similarity among them is that the majority of these studies are done on the basis of their works. In other words, the reasons of the suicides of the writers are extrapolated from their works. The studies done on Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath can be taken as examples for this assumption. Their works were taken for granted as their confessional notes of suicide. It is as if their works are testimonials which directly express the reasons for their suicide. Though this argument is not totally faulty, it may ignore those aspects of personality of the writer that lie outside his works. Also, such a reading can be a failure in discovering the stifled voices of the writer which exist between and behind the words of the works. Considering this, my attempt in the first case in this chapter is to find the lacunae in the linear critiques done on Nanditha, a young poetess who committed suicide. Simultaneously, I try to make possible a reading which does not adhere to any ideologies or concepts.

Beyond the Confinements of Confession

"I shout at them
That I no longer need them
Because I have discovered
They are all fragments of my ideal..."
(Nanditha - untitled poem)

The first case which I would like to analyse in this chapter is that of Nanditha, a young poetess who committed suicide in 1990 in Kerala. Since this chapter analyses real cases, I think it would be worthwhile to provide the essential biographical details in each instance. Nanditha was born on 21 March 1969 as the daughter of M. Sridhara Menon and Prabhavathi in Wayanad, a southern district of Kerala. She was the eldest of their two

children. She obtained an undergraduate degree, a Master's and an M.Phil in English Literature from Farooq College, Calicut University, and Mother Teresa Women's University at Chennai respectively. She committed suicide on 17 January, 1999 at the age of 29 for mysterious reasons while she was working as a Lecturer in English at a Degree College in Wayanad. Nobody knew that she could write poems, and none of her poems were published when she was alive. Later, her relatives and friends found some poems, written both in Malayalam and English, from her personal diary and published them. Pappiyon Books published the poems without much editing in 2002 by including the study of two scholars and a testimonial of her colleague and friend, Srilatha.

Nanditha's suicide has become a mystery for many reasons. The biographical details gathered from her close friends and relatives report that the actions in her life were largely unpredictable. She was far from consistent, and had the habit of taking unexpected turns frequently in life. Both personally and professionally, she had distanced herself from others. In a sense, she was an alien even to her parents, and they came to know about her poetic creativity only after her death. The reports say that though she started writing poems in 1982, her parents knew about it only the next day after her death. Not only her parents but also her close friend Srilatha admits that she did not know that Nanditha had a "poetic heart", though they shared several personal matters. Considering this character of Nanditha, one can decipher the web of mystery Nanditha had woven around her suicide. And, it can be seen that the very act of her suicide still remains an undeciphered sign in the literary circle of Kerala.

So, as far as Nanditha's suicide is concerned, the one and only source available and accessible is the poetry she kept secret till her death. Though it can never be said that her poems can demystify her suicide, they can be taken as the single "royal path" to the enigma of her life and suicide. They can be considered the portents of her vague plans to commit suicide at the least, and the aesthetic foretelling of the catastrophe she expected in her life at the most. Adopting this point, the critics, though there are only a few, have tried to unveil the mystery surrounding her suicide through a detailed study of her poems. They have analysed the images and allusions applied in the poems, and tried to find some logical connection between them and her biographic details. For this purpose, they have attempted to study her themes in the larger contexts of the principles of the great literary and philosophical schools of twentieth century. These critical readings, which are biographical, psychological and philosophical, have interpreted Nanditha's poems as dealing with themes such as loneliness, aloneness, the

self, identity crisis and the concept of the double and "the other." While some readings among them try to see Nanditha's poems as manifestations of her personal problems, others have read them as dealing with philosophical/ontological problems like absurdity and existential angst.[1] However, a thorough reading of Nanditha's poems and this criticism will reveal that the critics are focusing on a few selected themes and assumptions. Of course, each reading has to concentrate on its own theoretical assumptions and arguments, and rule out the other readings. But after the emergence of the theory of Deconstruction, it can be argued that there is no central, authoritative reading which prohibits all other readings. The theory brought out the iconoclastic concept that a perfect reading is only a myth. According to Deconstructive principles, texts have interpretations and not truths. Viewing from this perspective, the above mentioned critiques can be seen functioning as the supposed authoritative readings which do not allow a different kind of reading. So, my attempt, in this study, is to prove that no readings are total or complete. I try to prove this by finding the lacunae in the arguments of these linear critical studies. I also analyse a poem which denies any of these linear readings, and prove the possibility of infinite readings within a text.

It would be worthwhile to see how the critics have read Nanditha's poems and her act of suicide. I have selected three main critical studies of Nanditha, both on her suicide and her poems, done by reputed critics and academicians. Two of the studies are attached to the anthology of Nanditha's poems published by Pappiyon Books, and the third came out as an article in "Sree", the Sunday supplement of *Malayala Manorama*. The first critique, which was done by M.M. Basheer, an eminent academician and critic of Malayalam literature, was based on the Malayalam poems of Nanditha. In his study, which is considerably biographical, Basheer reads her suicide as an act of revenge against a frustrated life, and her poems a manifestation of the mental conflict aroused from her disquiet. He sees her suicide as the catastrophic outcome of the realization of the irreparable loss of a most intimate relationship. For Basheer, Nanditha's poems are the portrayal of the hopes, expectations and frustrations which she encountered in her life. He argues that, despite the hopes and dreams, Nanditha's journey was directed ultimately towards an inescapable abyss. Basheer decodes this abyss as her actual death, and mediates between her poems and her suicide. He also vaguely hints at a possible link between Nanditha's poems and the

[1] *Angst* is a German word for fear or anxiety. It is used in English to describe an intense feeling of emotional strife. Existentialists use the term to describe a profound and deep-seated spiritual condition of insecurity and despair in the free human being.

real events from her life, and argues that they all suggest a superficially fluctuating, but deeply determined voyage towards her self-annihilation. Citing the lines "Keeping the humming mosquitoes aside / Let me begin the journey / In search of my roots" (30) and, "Plucking the flowers that / Bloom at the eternity of the sea / Let me go back" (40), the critic tries to reinforce the poet's lifelong preoccupation with suicide, which is seen as being the metaphorical return journey to one's roots. Also, he can be seen connecting the actual events in Nanditha's life with the images applied in her posthumously published poems to prove the identification between the poet and the persona. In his study, he comes up with the supposedly mysterious reasons behind her marriage with Ajith, and tries to prove that her suicide was committed in vengeance against the regrets of her life. And, according to him, it is the lack/want of an intense love which she anticipated from relations that really persuaded her to take the extreme step. He moves a step further and indicates that it is due to the lack of a certain specific love that she committed suicide.

The second critical study which is included in the same book is done by Viswanathan, a university professor, who did a brief but deep reading of Nanditha's poems and her suicide. It is rather a study on the themes and literary techniques Nanditha applied in the poems. In the study, Viswanathan analyses the allotropic relationship between art and life through which each are illuminated and clarified. He sees Nanditha's resorting to poetic creation as a troubled mind's attempt to understand itself. He argues:

> When life is beset with a crisis, the vexed mind might feel desperately compelled to enter the territory of artistic creation as a means of comprehending its nature. One may or may not overcome the trauma, but the engagement with art turns out to be a discovery, a realization of one's own creative potential… (63)

He reads her poems as the display of an inner landscape turbulent with countless existential questions. According to him, Nanditha's poems (in this case, the English poems) mainly deal with themes like loneliness, the self, "the other", death and love in an existentialistic frame work. In his words, resorting to poetry was "a virtual indispensability" (63) to Nanditha for survival. He sees her poems as endeavours to retrieve her "self" from her mind's battle with itself and outside forces. He moves further with this argument and confirms: "She did not survive the trauma that afflicted her mind, but her creative faculty did" (63). As far as the literary techniques are concerned, he argues that these kinds of poetry, which emerged out of

mental struggle, have little patience with form, genre conventions or techniques of articulation. They, in his words, can never be a display of craftsmanship, intellectual subtlety or even verbal ingenuity. He also reads her poems as the speaking out against the experiences which emerged out of the realization of the absurdity and superfluity of day-to-day life. Citing lines from her English poems, the critic argues that it was her revelation that the pure existence is a myth that persuaded her to commit suicide. She had realized that self-confrontation was an agony, and suicide was the only way out from this misery. In short, Viswanathan reads Nanditha's suicide as the self-annihilation of an existentialist who is convinced of the absurdity of day-to-day life, and her poems are those which "constitute a hazardous and stubborn journey of a mind that seeks authenticity in every realm of experience…" (65).

The third critic I refer to here is Rupesh Paul, a contemporary poet and journalist of Malayalam literature. His study, which was published in "Sree" (19 Jan, 2003), was written in a flowery language and is mostly biographical. Differing in perspective from Viswanathan, Rupesh can be seen focusing on the actual events from Nanditha's life and tries to connect them with her poems. His study also analyses her work on the thematic level, and sees her mysterious personality as the resource of these poems. Rupesh's article seems to be a comprehensive biographical study which brought out the names with which Nanditha signed her poems. He points out that "Ammu", one of the names among them, is the name which Nanditha kept for her unborn daughter. Rupesh gathers the testimonials of Srilatha and Nanditha's parents to attain a better understanding of Nanditha. One vital point in Rupesh's reading is his finding of Nanditha's great admiration of the death-related poems of Sylvia Plath[2] and her methods of committing suicide. He reports that Nanditha was also greatly interested in Shakespearean characters like Othello and Cleopatra who killed themselves. Through all these references, Rupesh can be seen pointing towards a comparison/identification between the confessional poets (to be specific, Sylvia Plath) and Nanditha. As a supportive point to this argument, Rupesh

[2] Sylvia Plath was a twentieth century American poet, novelist and short story writer who dealt with socially tabooed themes such as abortion, female sexuality and suicide in a very unconventional style in her works. After an eventful life of mental breakdowns and suicide attempts, she committed suicide on 11 February 1963. Along with Anne Sexton, Plath is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry which was initiated by Robert Lowell and W.D. Snodgrass. Her major works include "Ariel", *Winter Trees, The Bell Jar* (a novel), and *The Colossus and Other Poems*.

notes Nanditha's quoting of certain lines from the poems of Kamala Das, an acclaimed Indian poet who writes in the confessional mode. However, an overall reading of Rupesh's article will make clear his attempts to categorise Nanditha as a "confessionlographer".[3] In other words, it can be said that Rupesh's attempt was to bring a confessional poet, or to be specific, a Sylvia Plath, out of Nanditha.

As is done in the other cases of suicide in the previous chapter, my attempt is to read Nanditha's suicide as a text. The Text, which is different from the Work, does not have a central or authorial meaning. It is neither confined within a structure nor limited to a certain time. Rather, as Foucault argues about writing, the Text, "unfolds like a game [*jeu*] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses is limits" (142). It creates a space where the speaking subject constantly disappears, making an infinity of readings possible. By viewing Nanditha's suicide as Text, my attempt in this study can be summarised under two aims: 1) to reveal the contradictions that lie hidden in the linear arguments of the previous studies done on her and her poems; and 2) to prove the possibility of infinite readings by bringing out a new reading of a poem which simultaneously makes a single authorial reading impossible.

The first critique I reanalyse in this study is the one done by Dr Basheer. His study begins by defining Nanditha's suicide as a an act of revenge done upon herself. In his own words, "Nanditha, who has striven for love, took revenge on herself from the realization that she would not get it…" (7). He sees her suicide as a reactionary act done out of the frustrations of life. In this sense, her decision to leave the world can be compared to that of a Durkheimian Anomic suicide.[4] In another place, Basheer can be seen confirming this idea: "It should be thought that everything [her acts,

[3] One who writes, especially poems, in the confessional mode. The term is derived from confessional poetry, which is an autobiographical mode of verse that reveals the poet's personal problems with unusual frankness. This term is sometimes used more loosely to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its distinctive sense depends on the candid examination of what were at the time of writing virtually unmentionable kinds of private distress. The genuine strengths of confessional poets, combined with the pity evoked by their high suicide rate, encouraged in the reading public a romantic confusion between poetic excellence and inner torment.

[4] The suicide that is committed out of sheer desperation and frustration. It happens when one's unregulated emotions are adjusted neither to other people nor to the social conditions they are supposed to meet. This act is generally followed by verbal or written blasphemes and violent recriminations against life.

including suicide] [is] a paying of revenge." (8) But the same critic can be seen arguing in the same study: "Nanditha had a certain mind that she would have bidden farewell to this world, even if love and marriage hadn't happened in her life" (14). As a corollary to this, he moves further in his arguments and states that she had a strong desire to live a contented family life with husband and child. Later, Basheer takes a different turn and pronounces a psychological comment that Nanditha had been haunted by a doomed, eternal *Thanatos*, the Freudian death instinct. This comment can be hinting at seeing Nanditha's suicide as the logical culmination of her life-long suicidal urge. Basheer also argues that Nanditha wrote poems for a narcissistic pleasure, and it is because of this reason that she kept them secret. But, it should be noted that, though she kept the poems secret, she is reported to have corrected and revised them with new dates. It implies that she had a wish, though a slight one, to get her poems published even after her death.

The study of Viswanathan focuses more on the poet's treatment of existential themes such as death, absurdity, existential angst, and her mode of narration. I do admit that his reading is comprehensive enough as far as an existentialistic study is concerned. His quoting of the proper lines is potential enough to prove his idea. But, where a general study of Nanditha's English poems is concerned, his analysis remains incomplete. A thorough reading of her poems will reveal that she dealt with various themes which are not related to existentialism. Such themes do not pertain to a sense of absurdity and existential angst, but include hope for a fulfilled life and mystical submission to the universe. Lines like "Who knows / I might wake up with sunrise / The next morning" (88); "The format of love / An ever-evolving thesis / The touch / I wait" (89); and, "O Night! take me to thy depths / Lull me to sleep / And let me sleep forever" (68) can be taken as instances for her treatment of themes which are entirely antithetical to the existential ones. So, the very citing of these lines itself proves the incomplete nature of Viswanathan's reading of Nanditha's poems.

The third critical reading, which is done by Rupesh Paul, as mentioned earlier, tries to read Nanditha as a confessional poet, and makes a close link between the poet and the persona. He tries to extrapolate Nanditha's poems from her life and vice versa. In this attempt, he can be seen adhering to the idea of the identification between the mind that creates and the person who suffers. It naturally rejects the Eliotic aesthetics of the impersonality on poetry, and sees the literary works (here, poems) as the expressions of the self. He tries to decipher the mystery around her suicide with the help of the actual events in her life. But, Rupesh admits the presence of an "other" in

Nanditha by quoting the lines of Kamala Das which Nanditha liked most. The very admitting of the existence of "the other" in Nanditha rules out the first essential characteristic of the confessional poet: coherence in identity. In other words, the possibility of changing speaking positions denies all attempts to brand Nanditha a confessional poet. Going deeper, it can be sensed that Rupesh's arguments are based on the assumption that Sylvia Plath was a confessional poet who expressed her coherent self through her poems. In other words, Plath functions as the "touch stone" for Rupesh in evaluating Nanditha's poems. But there are criticisms against seeing even Plath as a confessional poet. In her iconoclastic essay entitled "Dangerous Confessions: The Problem of Reading Sylvia Plath Biographically", Tracy Brain ingeniously rules out any attempt to see Plath's poems as an expression of her self. Furthermore, by quoting David Yezzi ("No poem can subsist on biography alone") and John Sutherland ("Every biography, even the most exhaustively researched, will be partial, and in crucial matters, irredeemably ignorant" [11]), Jo Gill argues that Plath's poems cannot be deciphered completely through her biography or the actual events in her life. She argues that it would be a great fault to see the narrators in the poems as the poets since the mediation between both of them is a matter of complexity. The writer may knowingly or unknowingly distort the facts. Also, there are chances for the poets to misremember the details of the events from life. Gill advances her arguments to a wider realm and sees the confessional mode as a ritualised exercise. She argues:

> Confession…is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualised technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poetic, not mimetic; it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth. It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable, and thereby confessional.

She quotes Foucault to reinforce his idea:

> The confession is a ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes, and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.

However, all these arguments prove that confessional writing need not be the honest expression of the self, and so, Rupesh's attempts to read Nanditha's poems on the basis of the actual events from her life do not hold water.

Going through all these arguments, it can be seen that these three critical studies have some lacunae in them. What has been done so far, in this chapter, is the unveiling of the contradictions in each critique on Nanditha. Besides, it can be seen that these critiques hold a common assumption – the viewing of Nanditha as a conceptual coherence – among them. None of the critics admit Nanditha's plurality of the self which appears in her poems. Also the critics have selected the pomes which display Nanditha as a consistent writer who deals with certain themes which are confessional and existential. In an other sense, it can be argued that they read her writing as a closed, centred and linear work which offers a single theme at a time. Seeing the author as a discursive construct, and the function of writing as, "…creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears" (142), Foucault argues that the sign of the writer has been reduced to the singularity of his absence, and his/her function is that of a dead man in the game of writing. According to Foucault, the conceptual coherence is an idea imposed for the supposed stability of the author who should provide authorial meaning. As far as Nanditha's poems are concerned, the critics' readings can be seen as attempts to read her as a conceptual coherence. The critics read the poems as if they deal with only singular, non-contradicting themes. So, here, I attempt to analyse a poem which cannot be included in any linear readings done by the critics. This untitled poem is dated 29 December 1993, six years before Nanditha's death. Thematically it differs entirely from the other poems in the anthology. While all other poems deal with her personal problems or stereotypical philosophical issues, this poem describes the calm and collected mood of a fulfilled person. It contains nothing of the frustrations and regrets of her other poems. Rather it depicts the last moments of a contented person for whom death is only a means to being one with the universe.

Here, the poet can be seen ecstatically sharing her life with the things and feelings she loved on earth:

> In the memory of an emerald-
> To the pang of a *manjaati* that
> Hid infinite love in its reddish heart-
> To the fulfilling compassion of the
> Hearty *aathira* that
> Swims in the full moon night-
> To the lovely smile of the child who
> Pulls the tale of the *saree*-
> To the condensed and compassionate love of
> The summer sun which

Appears with showers of fire-
I share my life. (52, translation mine)[5]

Though some of these things and feelings may be those which she did not get in life, the poet does not show any regret. As far as these lines are considered, I think, it would be wrong to assume that all the images used in this poem are fabricated. Rather, the imagery can be speculated as a conglomeration of lived experiences and constructed imaginations. However, my focus is on her silent sharing of her being with the loved things. Here, she does not hold any form of grudge upon the frustrated life, and it makes her sharing total. It should be specially noted that what she shares is neither her self nor hopes, nor even her life, but the totality of all these things, which I think, can be articulated better through the Malayalam word, *Janmam*.

The second stanza of the poem can be seen as driving the idea home. It confirms the idea of the suicide of a contented individual. It depicts the picture of a fulfilled person who walks silently and peacefully towards death. Here, she can be seen calling her suicide the meditation of the soul:

Then, meditation of soul

At *Gangothri*
To dissolve as blood
At the scarlet feet of my God. (52)

As far as the images are concerned, it can be seen that her longing was to become a drop of blood at the scarlet feet of her God. The sameness of the colour of these two things implies the merging or the total submission of the self without any grudges and regrets. Her act is related to reconciliation rather than retaliation. Also, her resorting to meditation at *Gangothri*, which is the confluence of several holy rivers, has its own relevance. It indicates the poet/narrator's desire for a mystical union with a larger reality to become a nobody. However, the death mentioned here implies more of a *Samadhi* or the fulfilled death of a *yogi*[6] rather than a revengeful self-killing of a worldly person.

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[5] A *manjaati* is a scarlet-coloured seed that is generally associated with love and *aathira* is the seasonal full moon day generally celebrated by Keralites, especially by women.

[6] One who is on the path of enlightenment. The *yogi* is the one who is *yogam* (in communion with the universe), and for him, death is only a means to transcend his lower self.

While talking about the author-function, Foucault explains the criteria the modern critics follow to define the author or author-function. One among them is that the author should be "a field of conceptual or theoretical coherence" (151). According to this, none of the author's works should contradict the consistency of the themes. And, the author's biography should comply with the images he/she depicts in the works. No uncertainty or contradiction in theme and style which risks the author's unity can be allowed here. As Foucault explains:

> The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing—all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be—at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious—a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organised around a fundamental or originating contradiction. (151)

In this sense, the linear critiques on Nanditha, the author, done by the previously mentioned critics can be considered as attempts to read Nanditha as a conceptual coherence. And it is for this purpose they denied this poem in their studies. The study of this poem, which differs entirely from the themes of her other poems, presents a risk, and this is why they did not consider this in their studies. By discussing this poem, an outlier in terms of theme, I disprove the imposed readings on Nanditha's suicide and her poems. Simultaneously, this reading proves her inconsistent existence as phoenix, "the bird", in Nanditha's own words, "that burns between birth and death" (32).

The Spring of Suicide

"The duty of the prey is to die
And, death, an enchanting copulation,
Death, an enchanting copulation."
- Shalvy

The second writer whose suicide I analyse in this chapter is Shalvy, the talented Malayalam poet who committed suicide in 2003 in Kerala. Shalvy was more popular as a publisher than as a poet in Malayalam literature. It is his publishing company, Mulberry, which brought the great works of writers such as Kazantzakis, Nietzsche, Vincent van Gogh, Kawabata and Salvador Dalí into Malayalam. It was also through Mulberry that the first works of the Malayalam writers as K.G. Sankarapilla, Vijayalakshmi, Aymanam

John and V.S. Anilkumar were published. Shalvy was much praised for his radical beautification of the layout and cover design of his Malayalam books. He edited two books, and his poems are anthologised under the titles *Nostalgia* and *Alaukikam* [The Ethereal].

Shalvy, like Nanditha, was not interested in publishing his poems. Many of his poems were published only after his death. He was very reluctant to put his poems into print, and he himself admits in the "pre-note" and "post-note" to his anthologies: "My first poem and the seven or eight poems which were written subsequently were published in periodicals. Since then, I haven't given any poems to any publishers in Malayalam" (13) and "I haven't shown any of my poems to any publishers since '85" (123). We can infer from this that several of his poems must have been lost. This tendency to keep the poems secret may be seen as proof of the most subjective nature of his poems. In other words, Shalvy's poems are confessional and personal in nature. A thorough reading of them will reveal that there is hardly any difference between the poet and the persona. For Shalvy, the poems were the expression of his personality rather than the means to escape from the personality. I don't deny the argument that there cannot be a total identification between the poet and the persona even in confessional poetry, however the distance between them in Shalvy's poems can be seen as flimsy. The Malayalam print media have read Shalvy's suicide as the result of the financial crisis he encountered from his business, i.e., publishing company. It was a fact that Shalvy was suffering badly from economic problems. Mulberry, which once challenged the established book publishers in Malayalam, then began facing the utmost financial crisis. Besides, Shalvy was suffering from heart disease. Combining these points, the contemporary Malayalam newspapers interpreted Shalvy's suicide as the culmination of these material problems. But, these conclusions without considering his poems and the ideas he expressed through them can be seen as unjustifiable critical exercises. I don't deny the fact that Shalvy had had "enough" problems in life. But I do argue that they alone would not be potential enough to lead him to self-annihilation. In this regard, V.R. Sudheesh, Shalvy's close friend and a contemporary Malayalam writer rightly states: "I don't believe that he [Shalvy] committed suicide due to burdensome debts. A debt, in publisher's business, is a temporary state. Shalvy has experiences in clearing them with the coming productions…Now; it is death that made Shalvy a debtor" (121).

Reading theoretically, it can be said that Shalvy's suicide has been interpreted as a Work by the contemporary print media and the supportive critics. The Work always presupposes a centre, which provides the so-called

authorial meaning. As far as Shalvy's suicide is concerned, the biographic reading, which interprets the suicide of a person on the basis of the actual events and problems of his life, is considered as the centre. A reading in this perspective views his suicide as the catastrophic response to his problems. This kind of reading denies all other readings, which may bring out more truths. As far as this study is concerned, it can be seen that a reading of Shalvy's suicide that is based on his poems has thus far not appeared. According to Foucault, viewing an author as a thematic and stylistic unity was a traditional criterion for defining the author or the author-function. He argues: "…one [the author] must also exclude works that are written in a different style, containing words and expressions not ordinarily found in the writer's production" (151). In Shalvy's case, it can be guessed that the variety in themes and expressions in his poems may also have dissuaded the traditional critics to undertake thorough study of them. So, my attempt in this study is to view Shalvy's suicide as a Text, the methodological field which allows infinite readings. Viewing his suicide as a Text enables me to decipher his eternal preoccupation with death that is directly or indirectly hinted at in his poems.

A thorough reading of his poems will reveal that Shalvy had a considerable inclination towards suicide. His lifelong preoccupation with suicide can be seen manifesting in different ways in his poems. For Shalvy, poetry is not only what is recreated in words. He sees poetry everywhere and, in the same way, he imagines and depicts suicide in various angles and forms in his poems. Going through the poems of Shalvy, it can be seen that suicide was a means for him to surrender his self to the universe. He seems to have nursed an innate craving to be one with nature, and he finds the best method in suicide. In the very beginning of the anthology entitled *Alaukikam*, he quotes the lines of the Spanish poet Lorca in which sleep is depicted as a metaphor for suicide: "I want to sleep the sleep of that child / who wanted to cut his heart on the high rear" (12). Even though the act of sleep is a spontaneous act, here, there is a craving for it, and the very craving implies an intentional sleep – which is suicide. He sees the act of suicide as a "letting go" experience which helps him to submit himself to nature. There are various pictures of a lover who submits himself at the feet of the beloved in the poems, which can be considered a distant symbolic surrendering of the poet to nature through the act of suicide. Nothing can be seen remaining in the imagery after this submission, and this termination emphasizes its resemblance with the act of suicide. In the same way, in the poems entitled "Veetu" [The Home], and "Aprathyaksham" [Disappearence], Shalvy depicts two pictures of the human being's submission to the universe. The last two lines of the former, "Eternal sleep with you / In the bed of the time-

transcending sands" (45), evoke the idea of a much-desired sleep which hints at the act of suicide. The title of the second poem itself resembles the concept of suicide. In it, Lily's intentional disappearance from the physical world to an unmentioned space is compared to the wind's submission to the forest. It is again compared to the disappearance of rain drops into the soil, and all these verbal pictures resemble the act of suicide and the subsequent submission to existence.

There is a verbal picture in the poem "Ila Kozhiyum Kaalam" [The Time When the Leaves Shed], where the notion of suicide is contained within the image of the poet sitting and leaning on a cup of poison, his desire to become one with the universe seen positioned in a linear sequence. The often-repeated metaphor of sleep is seen manifesting itself again in the poem "Swakarya Kavitha" [Private Poem] in which the poet is lulled to sleep by "somebody." This "somebody" can be perceived as death, and the poet's very invitation implies his desire to commit suicide. In the same sense, the very act of suicide is described by the poet as the meeting point of life and death. For Shalvy, it is where the earthly meets the ethereal. This idea of the convergence of the human and cosmic elements is vividly expressed in the poem "Ithrayeyullu" [Only This Much][7] where the poet states: "It is in death the earth and the sky become one" (64).

One of the major suicidal images that is skilfully applied in Shalvy's poems is that of the sexual union. In his poems, the act of copulation is depicted as a transcendental experience, and it is related to suicide, another transcending experience. Suicide is compared to sexual orgasm, an experience which takes man beyond the physical world, and for the same reason the act of suicide is described in erotic terms. The image of copulation is vividly depicted in the poem, "Katal, Cathedral, Nhaan Ninakkaycha Kattukal" [The Sea, The Cathedral and My Letters to You]. In the poem, there is a craving on the part of the poet to indulge in a sexual union with Rosemary. The desire to copulate with Rosemary who had died long before implies the poet's craving to die a wilful death. Though it may be psychologically read as the sexual disorder of necrophilia,[8] the desire to copulate with the dead, it can be seen that the ultimate aim of the poet is not sexual pleasure but death. Here, the two phenomena, copulation and suicide meet and merge into each other, and it becomes difficult to differentiate one from the other.

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[7] This poem is reported to have been written by Shalvy about the suicide of his friend and poet Sanil Das.

[8] Necrophilia, also called thanatophilia, is a sexual disorder characterized by a sexual attraction to corpses.

In the same way, in the poem entitled "Sayanora", the poet juxtaposes euthanasia and orgasmic ecstasy and erases the boundary between them. In the poem, he pleads with Sayanora to release him from every bondage through acts that resemble sexual foreplay. He begs her to "draw that sacred song on his forehead with the thumb of rain" (92, translation mine). A thorough reading will easily reveal that the sacred song that is drawn on his forehead is nothing but death, and what he really pleads for is euthanasia by Sayanora. A similar picture can be seen in the poem, "Mazha Enne Marakkumbol" [When Rain Forgets Me] where the poet feels the bite of the snake at the eyes and the erect penis. This image connects the poet's desire for suicide with sexual arousal.

Even though there are so many minor pictures of copulation and suicide in Shalvy's poems, the most apparent description of these can be seen in the poem entitled "Maranathinde Sakhikku" [To the Beloved of Death]. The title itself connotes the juxtaposition of love and death and in the second part of the poem, the poet vividly states:

> "The duty of the prey is to die
> And death, an enchanting copulation
> Death, an enchanting copulation." (35, translation mine)

As with copulation, the death mentioned here is also a deliberate act, and from this logic it can be argued that it is not natural death but suicide which is implied in these lines.

One of the most used words in Shalvy's poems is "memory" (another is "recollection"), and one major objective behind the poet's craving for suicide is the human being's innate craving to be free from torturing memories. Even though he beautifully depicts nostalgic pictures, it may be seen that his real intention is not to be in them but to transcend them. In fact, his affiliation is with the act of forgetting rather than with the act of remembering. In the poem "Marannupoya Entho Onnu" [Something That Is Forgotten], he speaks about the memories and the poem ends with the poet being "saved" in the memory of the computer. He speaks about the "wine of forgetfulness" and "the broken dams of time" (from "Swakarya Kavitha") and feels ecstatic in the tears of joy which exist beyond memory.

The metaphors of rain and water are often applied in the poems and they may be considered as the archetypes of a suicide which erases all kinds of memory. The poet is sometimes found tortured by memories, as described in "Swakarya Kavitha", and he releases himself through suicide. In

"Sayanora", after intimate sexual intercourse, he hopes to reach the state of forgetfulness and it is the act of suicide which provides him such tranquillity. For the same reason, having been tortured by immortal memories, he pleads for a death like the Sibyl[9] of Greek mythology and craves for an expurgation of memories through it.

A deeper study of Shalvy's poems will give us the image of suicide as a circle which is made of the two hemispheres of pain and pleasure. If the image of suicide is taken as the Taoist circle[10] of life, agony and ecstasy can be considered as Yin and Yang, the antithetical elements whose very opposition makes life possible. They are complementary: one ceases to exist in the absence of the other. Even though Shalvy glorifies suicide as an ecstatic experience, he does not deny the agony it creates in man. Sometimes the poet becomes masochistic and generates pleasure from pain and pulls back the dichotomy between these two phenomena. He removes the opposition between them and they become complementary rather than contradictory. There is an apparent mentioning of this idea in the poem entitled "Bhogi" [The Hedonist], where the poet mentions the experience of the pain of love. A similar expression can be seen in the poem "Andhande Kaazhcha" [Sight of the Blind] where the poet encounters life and death simultaneously.

After going through the poems of Shalvy, it may be confirmed that almost all of his poems are directly or indirectly related to suicide, and his preoccupation with suicide makes his poems worth being called 'The Spring of Suicide.' In the post-note to *Alaukikam*, Shalvy opines: "Poem, which ends as poem, is a limitation for me" (172), and it is a "divine sacrifice" for him. Considering this, it can be said that what Shalvy sacrificed at the altar was nothing but his life, and suicide was his way to perform that sacred ritual.

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[9] The Sibyls were women in ancient Greece and Rome who lived in caves, and were renowned for their gift of prophecy. This reference is to the Cumaen Sibyl who lived for about a thousand years. This came about when Apollo granted her a wish; she took up a handful of sand and asked to live for as many years as the grains of sand she held. But she didn't ask for enduring youth and Apollo allowed her body to wither away because the Sibyl did not consent to have sex. T.S. Eliot depicted Sibyl in *The Waste Land* as a person who craves for death.

[10] This symbol is a visual depiction of the intertwined duality of all things in nature. It consists of two energies: Yin, the dark, passive and feminine, and Yang, the bright, active and masculine. According to Taoist principles they are so intermingled that they cannot exist without the other. It is their union which makes life possible.

CHAPTER V

HOMICIDE IN THE GUISE OF SUICIDE: A STUDY OF THE SUICIDES OF THE SUBALTERN OF KERALA

"Suicide is a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed."
- Karl Menninger

My final chapter deals with what many regard as mundane, because uncritiqued; unreal because unheard: the Text of 'subaltern suicide'. This study is based on the suicides of the subaltern of Kerala. From the new historical perspective, all social and cultural activities can be seen as texts which express the ideologies of the dominant class. All social practices, including literature, are manifestations of the prevailing ideologies and subversive strategies. A thorough reading will reveal the dissonant voices which lie under the superficially coherent social phenomena. Also, it will unveil the negotiations and appropriations done to quieten these conflicting marginalised elements in a given text. Taking this new historical premise, my attempt in the second case in this chapter is to venture into a political reading which can unveil the suppressed elements in the Text of the suicides of the subaltern community of Kerala.

This third category of suicide which is analysed in this study consists of the real suicides which are committed for social and cultural reasons. I agree with the general assumption that the phenomenon of suicide is always the act of *a man* who dies for his own reasons, and there is no exact common definition for multiple suicides. In other words, all suicides, though their methods of dying and contexts have several similarities, are individual ones. Only the man who commits it knows the reasons which persuaded him to it. And, it can be argued that even the person themself cannot be sure about the real driving force behind his/her act. In this sense, it can be seen that any attempt to give a social reading to suicide can be a fruitless one. But it would be interesting to analyse the reasons of suicides which have apparent

similarities in their contexts and methods of doing it. Moreover, it will be worthwhile to venture into a study on social suicides, which sometimes become a social crisis when they increase disproportionately. Perhaps the most comprehensive study in this field was conducted by the great sociologist Emile Durkheim. By admitting the exclusive nature of suicide, Durkheim has proved that suicides can be studied deductively by relating them to the respective causes from which they seem to spring. In the Durkheimian method, there is no objective criterion for the selection of the cases for a general study of suicide, and it is a fact that a deduction uncontrolled by experiment is always questionable. Even then, Durkheim argues that such research on suicide is useful in providing a minimum concrete character for the causes of these suicides. However, the present study, an analysis of the psycho-cultural aspects behind the suicides of the subaltern community in Kerala, can be described in Durkheim's own words as an attempt to find, "the various currents which generate suicide from their social origins to their individual manifestations" (240).

According to the statistics offered by the contemporary Malayalam print media, there is a disproportionate increase in the rate of suicide among the subaltern[1] of Kerala. With it, a deliberate shift from the so called normal to macabre methods of suicide can also be noticed among them. If the subaltern's commonest mode of committing suicide in the olden times was hanging, with a few exceptional cases of consuming poisons, a look into the recent statistics will reveal that they have started adopting severer methods of self-immolation, jumping from heights, etc. Though the governments have studied this phenomenon, they can be seen branding these suicides the result of psychological stress and economic crisis. To be more specific, according to the governmental reports, these suicides are the outcome of the mental conflicts arising from unbearable debt, marital discord, illegitimate pregnancy, sexual dysfunction and nihilistic ideation. Governments' appointment of psychiatrists as the commission chairpersons for the study and their psychological explanations for these suicides can be seen as lopsided attempts. Also, these studies can be seen totally denying the

[1] The term subaltern originally means the subordinates in the military hierarchies. Anotnio Gramsci, the reputed Italian Marxist, first used the term to refer to the groups who stand outside the established structure of political representation. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to the marginalised people and lower castes who do not have the historical share. Homi Bhabha, the postcolonial critic defines the subaltern as the oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group. By the term, in this study, I mean the dalits and tribals of Kerala who were oppressed by the elites.

cultural reasons behind the suicides. Since one's self is considered a cultural construct, this kind of reading which negates the cultural factors seems to be an incomplete and unfair one. From a different angle, the governmental attribution of the apparently apolitical reasons for the suicides of subalterns can be speculated as the exercising of hegemony for some dubious interests. I do admit here that the explanations given by the governmental agencies for these suicides are not totally wrong. Instead, I argue that they are not total, and their adherence to their explanations is unjustifiable. So, considering all these, my attempt in this paper is to reanalyse the suicide of the subaltern of Kerala from a psycho-cultural perspective. For this purpose, I view the selves of these suicides as cultural constructs and try to read their suicides as a cultural Text. And, for the study, the general assumptions of psychology and the theoretical premises of deconstruction are applied. In addition to studying the suicides of the subaltern community of Kerala I also assess the suicide of Neethu, a young Dalit girl who committed suicide in Kerala by burning herself, a case in some ways corollary to those of the Keralan subaltern.

A survey on the suicide of the subaltern of Kerala will show that there was the least number of suicides among them during the olden days of political and economic oppression. Though they were brutally assaulted and inhumanly exploited by the British and the feudal lords in those days, the number of suicides among them was lower. Also, the general method which was used by them for killing themselves was hanging. On the contrary, in the last ten years, a radical acceleration can be seen in the rate of suicide among the subaltern of Kerala. By reading suicide as a cultural Text, I point at the removal of the stress-relieving mechanisms from their culture as the vital cause behind this shift. I would like to argue that the subaltern had several stress ventilating mechanisms in their cultures. The removal of them without providing any equivalent substitutes may help considerably in accumulating the unshared stress, and it may consequently lead them to the ultimate solution of suicide. From this perspective, I categorise the cultural cathartic mechanisms of the subaltern of Kerala into three fields: the land, the language, and the rites and rituals. And, I try to analyse the issue from a psycho-cultural angle.

Since time immemorial, the life of the subaltern has been intimately related to his/her land. Their identity is inseparable from their land, and the subaltern can be rightly called the very salt of the earth. As far as the subaltern of Kerala are concerned, P.K. Prakash, an eminent scholar and journalist points out that there has been hundreds of years' relation between

the Adivasis[2] of Wayanad (the people who form the majority of the subaltern in Kerala) and the lands, mainly forests, where they live. They depended on the land for everything in life – food, medicine, and the things for building their homes. C.K. Janu, an emerging Adivasi activist, confirms this idea in her much discussed autobiography *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu*: "All our songs, customs and medicinal practices were born from the system of life that we adopted as intimately related to the earth. They have no existence in a different system" (49). Darley, a cultural critic, argues that it is people's attachment to a place, which evokes a sense of place, that is constitutive of their identity. The land had become an inevitable part of their collective self, and they could not conceive the idea of possessing private land. Prakash explains that the land was never a commodity for the *Adivasis*, and they did not have any units for measuring the land. According to Janu, it was the mainstream civil society that brought the idea among the *Adivasis* that the land is a commodity or a market item. She accuses civil society for this: "A great discovery was made that land was a commodity to be sold and bought. Fences and walls fragmented all the land" (48). She reinforces the point in another place in the same book: "Land is a commodity to sale and other deals…It is in this situation that we [Adivasis of Wayanad] felt we must have some land of our own to keep hunger away" (52). Prakash argues that the subaltern of Kerala had an ecosystem which could be called their own. For the subaltern, the land was not only an occupying space but also their very identity and the means for survival. Dr Prasantha Kumar has rightly commented: "the land is the visual symbol of the survival of the subaltern," whereas Darley Jose quotes Daniels in his article about the same issue: "…the place is inseparable from the consciousness of those who inhabit it." So, it can be argued that the subaltern's fight for the land, in a sense, is his/her struggle for their culture that has been vandalized. Also, for the subaltern, the land was imbued with spiritual meanings, and no subaltern wants to be buried in an alien land. According to the indigenous beliefs of the *Adivasis*, man has existence after his death. Dr Kumaran Vayaleri, a reputed scholar in *Adivasi* studies, notes that certain Adivasi clans believe that the deceased will live in the nether world as they lived on the earth. Based on this belief, the *Adivasis* have the habit of keeping the dead man's things beside his grave. Also, they perform certain rituals such as *Gaddiga*[3] annually at their burial

[2] The Indian term *Adivasi* literally means the original inhabitants of a certain area, especially rural. Here, I use the term to refer to the indigenous people or the aboriginals of Kerala.

[3] This is a ritualistic practice which is related to the funeral ceremony of the *Adiyars*, an Adivasi clan of Wayanad. They are performed to exorcise the evil spirits. There

ground to exorcise the evil spirits from their land. If it is not done, they staunchly believe that a great curse will fall on the dead man's family and the whole society. Darley shows the statement of an *Adivasi* chief as proof of this. In an interview, the chieftain of *Kaattunaickan*, an *Adivasi* clan at Wayand can be seen saying: "This is our ancestral land. If we go away from here, how can we perform our rituals and ceremonies? How can we please our ancestors and ask for their guidance? Our existence will be in danger if we go away from this place…We do not want to die in alien lands." From all these instances it can be inferred that the land was an inevitable part of the subaltern identity. And, the subaltern also used their land as a cultural stress relieving mechanism in the olden days. Invasions of the virgin forests were a common practice among them. The other related activities were the pilfering and migration of the lands. These activities can be considered the methods of defiance and defence on the part of the oppressed subaltern in the olden times. Since these practices were not criminalised at that time, they have functioned as a means for the subaltern to ventilate the accumulated stress which arose out of the oppression inflicted on the community by the social elites. Thrift argues, "Landscapes can be explored as symbolic fields, as maps of meaning, as ways of seeing …and read as texts" based on the ways in which social groups make their rules and regulations. In this respect, here, the land can be considered a cultural, symbolic and cathartic mechanism of the subaltern of Kerala to relieve their stress.

The second area which functioned as a stress ventilating mechanism of the subaltern of Kerala is language. A survey on the language of the subaltern of Kerala will reveal that they did not have a solid, coherent language system. Instead, their language was a conglomeration of various languages and slangs which were used by them effortlessly. Scholars in the concerned study can be seen agreeing on the point that the subaltern of Kerala did not have a script for their language. Though theirs was a phono-centric linguistic system, the subaltern did not have any problem in communicating ideas. Kumaran argues that the languages of the *Adivasis* of Kerala are blends of various languages, including Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, and Tulu. He admits that their languages are intrinsically related to their cultural identity. He also points out that each *Adivasi* group has their own language and, "the communication in their language is possible only within their community" (29, translation mine). Janu explains this speciality of the

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are two kinds of Gaddigas: *Pooja Gaddiga*, which is done to exorcise the spirits which affect the family of the deceased, and *Naadu Gaddiga*, which is performed to exorcise the evil spirits which haunt the community.

language: "…different communities among us use different languages…but when we speak to each other we can understand without much confusion" (34). Here also, Janu blames civil society for imposing on them the script of an alien language (here, Malayalam), which was no use to them. She continues: "Since the people who knew reading and writing were few and since there was no need to write down the language, the script to write them down also did not exist…Language does not create any difficulties to our communities" (34). Referring to this remark from Janu, Prasantha Kumar argues that civil society has done wrong to the subaltern by logo-centricizing[4] their phono-centric language. This imposition, which negated the subaltern one of their means of expressing themselves, itself can be seen as a hegemonic exercise on the part of civil society. Moreover, there had been certain practices like *Theyyam*[5] (which I will explain in detail shortly), which offered freedom of linguistic expression for the subaltern. The subaltern was allowed to rebuke, ridicule, and to an extent, question the atrocities done on them by the elites in the rural practices such as *Yaarn* and *Theyyam*.[6]

The third cultural sphere which was used by the subaltern to give vent to the mental stress arising out of social oppression is their rites and rituals. As Kumaran explains, rites and rituals are tradition-oriented. They have been formed out of the experiences the subaltern has encountered in his life. In this respect, rites and rituals are influenced by experiences which are both personal and communal. A deciphering of these beliefs and practices may reveal the experiences that mould a people's philosophy of life. A thorough study in this way will show that the subaltern had several stress-relieving practices in their rites and rituals in the olden days.

Pulappeti and *Vannappeti*[7] can be seen as good examples of this. They can be read as the subaltern's cultural cathartic mechanisms which helped to

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[4] By the term, Prasantha Kumar means the process of changing of any verbal matter into the written form. He uses the term "logos" in the sense of the graphic representation of anything, rather than the poststructural sense of spoken word or speech.

[5] *Theyyam* is a popular ritual dance of northern Kerala (Kannur and Kasaragod districts). This folk and tribal art is a perfect blending of dance and music. *Theyyam* stands beyond the caste discriminations of Hinduism, and it can be seen even defying the rigid caste system.

[6] *Yaarn* is a harvest dance among the rural folk. Like *Theyyam*, it offers opportunities to relieve the mental stress created out of social oppression.

[7] The terms are derived from three Malayalam words, *Pulaya* and *Vannan*, which are the names of the two lower castes on the social ladder, and *Peti*, meaning fear.

divert, relieve and recompense the cruelties and oppression inflicted upon them by the high caste landlords. Another area which provided several stress ventilating practices was their witchcraft. They had a strong belief in magical practices. The previously mentioned *Gaddiga* can be seen as a perfect example of the magical practices of the subaltern of Kerala. Kumaran explains: "…there were magical practices for pathological purposes. They [the *Adivasis*] believe it is when an evil spirit enters in one's body, he/she gets [a] disease. Another belief is that a man or a woman can be seduced with the help of a *mantra*. Belief in omens was also strong among them" (28, translation mine). Even though many of these beliefs do not hold a logical and rational ground, the subaltern had a strong belief in them. The practices like "symbolic murder" were very common among the subaltern societies where the magician held a considerable position. A prominent cultural practice which functioned as a cathartic mechanism in the olden times was the previously mentioned *Theyyam*. The word *Theyyam*, which is the crude equivalent for the Sanskrit/Malayalam word *Daivam*, meaning "the God", is both an indigenous ritual and a performing folk art. It fulfils the ritualistic and entertaining functions for a people. In both senses, *Theyyam* reflects the hopes, frustrations, and even the cultural resistance of the subaltern. The belief in *Theyyam*, which is basically the cultural practice of the subaltern, is so deep-rooted that it even invigorates the subaltern to defy the rigid caste system. Keeping the magical aspects aside, several *Theyyams* can be seen as a means to question the prevailing injustice done on the subaltern on the basis of caste discrimination. The myths of the *Theyyam* such as *Pottan* and *Muchilottu Bhagavathi*[8] can be cited as the perfect evidence to prove this argument. These myths uphold the socially liberating idea of the resurrection of the subaltern. In this very

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During the days of Feudal Kerala, these people were the most oppressed ones on the social ladder. Their life was no better than the life of animals. They were branded as the untouchables. But one day a year, these people would be given anarchic freedom to do anything. Psychologically speaking, these practices can be considered stress relieving mechanisms absorbed in a culture.

[8] According to their indigenous beliefs, *Pottan*, which means "an imbecile" or "fool", was an intelligent person who belonged to the lower caste. He was reported to have questioned the prevailing caste system, and was decapitated by the higher caste people. He, on account of his bravery, is reported to have resurrected as a spirit. Now *Pottan* is a *Theyyam* among the subaltern of Kerala. One myth says that *Muchilottu Bhagavathi* was a lower caste woman who was exceptionally intelligent. She challenged the elites in intellectual debates and defeated them. The enraged social elites trapped her in a debate by accusing her of immorality, and ostracized her from the society. She committed suicide and has too become a *Theyyam*, which can be seen in the northern part of Kerala.

act itself, the *Theyyam* can be seen functioning as a cultural stress-relieving mechanism. It gives the opportunity to relieve the stress of the subaltern once in a year and helps him to achieve the dignity of a deity. Vishnu Namboothiri, perhaps the most eminent scholar in studies on *Theyyam*, explains this idea: "Though the subaltern was denied basic human rights due to the caste-discrimination by the social elites, it was common for the elites to prostrate before him [the subaltern] once he comes in the costume of a Theyyam." In its functioning as a cultural "safety valve," the *Theyyam* can be compared to the European practice of carnival.[9] According to Bakhtin, during carnival, hierarchy is not only suspended but also inverted. In it, the village idiot becomes the king, and the sinners in priestly vestments will preach nonsensical or blasphemous sermons. This is the negation of the official, and the celebration of the suppressed elements. Considering these aspects, *Theyyam* can be seen as sharing many similarities with carnival.

Through these examples and explanations it can be proved that the subaltern of Kerala had their own cultural stress-relieving mechanisms in the previous decades. With the invasion of civil society and in the onslaught of the globalizing agenda, these practices were considered obscurantist and consequently removed from the subaltern cultures. Their land was made a commodity, their languages were made script-centred and remade in the framework of the foreign languages, and their rites and rituals turned into museum pieces without any socio-political relevance. The homogenising agenda of the globalizing project and the hegemonic influence of high art have only accelerated this adverse movement. As a result of this, the subaltern community of Kerala has lost its cultural cathartic mechanisms. And, in such a context, I argue that the accumulated stress can create a psychological immobility among them. And, it can lead them to suicides on a larger scale. Also, the unsharing nature of the stress may create an extreme hostility in them against whom they feel responsible for the helpless situation. This ill will, which has no outlet, may become internalised and persuade them to make their suicides a terrible one.

As explained in the study of the previous cases of suicide, here also, I read the suicide of the subaltern of Kerala as a Text. In this context, it can be seen that the so-called governmental explanations for the subaltern suicides were viewing them as Works. The traditional term Work presupposes a

[9] Carnival is a festival season, which occurs immediately before Lent. It typically involves a public celebration or parade combining some elements of a public street party. Carnival consists of practices such as ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, celebration of the body, and profanation of the so-called sacred texts.

purposive agent who stands firm at the centre of the Work to offer meanings. But, once the case is seen as a Text, the supposed stable centre will lose its stability in meanings, and consequently, the possibility of infinite readings arises. A distinctive poststructural view is that no text can mean what it seems to say. This proposition itself rules out the possibility of any stable, central reading that is provided by a single agent. As far as the theoretical premises of cultural studies are concerned, the suicide of the subaltern of Kerala can be read as a cultural Text, a cultural phenomenon which allows a reader to read it from the different angles of a given society. This viewing of suicide as Text also helps to understand how prevailing ideologies establish the cultural phenomenon in the context. From a deconstructive perspective, such an analysis itself is a liberative measure for the oppressed and deprivileged.

A case of suicide which I analyse on the basis of the above-mentioned logic in this study is the suicide of Neethu. According to a newspaper report, Neethu was an 11th class student who belonged to a lower community. The report says that her class teacher used to insult her by using her caste-name before the other students in the class. When the insult became unbearable, Neethu committed suicide by burning herself. Even though this sympathetic incident was reported by almost all newspapers of Kerala, no further study or enquiry has been done on the issue. And, though the reports connoted some of the political relevance of the incident, it can be seen that the case was not read from a cultural perspective. So, my attempt, in this study is to reanalyse the incident to find out the above-mentioned psycho-cultural reasons behind it. For the purpose, I use some general psychological and sociological assumptions which may be important for a study like this. Above all, the viewing of the incident as a Text facilitates me to endeavour a reading that is different from the governmental ones.

We have seen in the first part of this study that the subaltern had their own cultural outlets to ventilate the stress created by daily life. These cultural cathartic mechanisms are largely classified into three categories: the land, the language, and rites and rituals. I have mentioned that that subaltern of Kerala had a strong belief in the sorcerous practice of "symbolic murder", which is known in different regions as *Oti* or *Nizalkkuthu*, and generally known as *Maaranam*.[10] It can be seen that the subaltern used these occult

[10] Maaranam, which literally means "bringing Marnam or death"is one of the branches, Vasyam, Stambhanam, Uchatanam, Aaavahanam being the others, of black magical practices of the people of Kerala. It was generally performed by the people of lower caste as Malayas, Vannans etc. Maranam is the sorcerous practice

practices as a profession, and they did it mainly for others. It is only on rare occasions they did it for themselves. However, it can be assumed that the subaltern had little doubt about the success of these magical practices. And, since it is a communal practice, the idea has been imprinted in the collective unconscious of the subaltern. These techniques were in practice till a few decades ago. But, in the onslaught of the globalizing agenda, they were removed from society without providing a substitutive mechanism for it. In this context, I argue that the idea may have internalised in the mind of the subaltern who lives in modern times. And, he/she may use these techniques internally for mental relief. So, whenever the accumulated anger towards the inaccessible external enemy becomes unbearable, the subaltern, who believes that the enemy can be eliminated symbolically, would attribute the spirit of the enemy to a part of his/her self, and would try to annihilate it. The paradox in it is that, since the enemy is a part of the subject's self, he/she can perform the elimination only by destroying themselves. So, as far as the suicide of Neethu is concerned, it can be inferred that what she was attempting was an internalised symbolic murder. Even if she was a person who considered the sorcerous practices superstitious acts, the idea might have been imprinted in her collective unconscious. And, her mind may have persuaded her to execute the "internal murder" to carnalize the accumulated anger towards the teacher, the external enemy in this case. It also should be mentioned in this respect that Neethu can be seen as having shown extreme courage by adopting the terrible method for committing suicide that she did. Burning oneself is an awful method of committing suicide, which any girl of seventeen years old would naturally be frightened to even think of. The fierceness involved in Neethu's suicide indicates the higher grade of hatred which can be seen in the Durkheimian anomic suicide, which is committed as an act of retaliation and revenge. Reading it from this angle, Neethu's act can be considered more as a murder than a suicide. In other words, I would like to call it a homicide in the guise of suicide. In a slightly different reading, Neethu's suicide can be compared to that of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, whose suicide was problematized by the theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her monumental essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri is reported to have committed suicide by hanging herself at the time of her menstruation. Citing this point, Spivak argues that her [Bhuvaneswari's] action of waiting for menstruation to disprove any supposed scandal that may arise in future is an attempt at the rereading of the social text of *sati*: "Bhuvaneswari had known that her death would be

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of killing a human being by using the magical techniques. Oti and Nizhalkkuthu are dark arts related to Maaranam. If a person is killed by the disguising techniques in Oti, he/she can be killed by hitting the vital parts of his/her shadow in Nizalkkuthu.

diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. By waiting, Bhuvaneswari the brahmacarini…perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way" (307).

Though the study of a suicide can be blamed as a purely imaginary creation (due to the absence of the subject), it is not a totally futile attempt. The very method which is adopted and the bodies of the suicide can be seen as potential materials for a reading that is politically and culturally significant. It is rightly remarked by Susan Johnson that "The bodies of the dead can be read as texts which invoke multiple interpretations and meanings" (598). Reading Neethu's self-immolation from this perspective, the severity of which implies a protest, retaliation and even murder, can be seen as the rewriting of the subaltern suicide. So, even while admitting the Spivakian proclamation that the subaltern cannot speak[11] (308), Neethu's suicide can be read, as Spivak argues in the case of Bhuvaneswari, as "an unemphatic, ad hoc, subaltern rewriting of the social text" of suicide.

[11] By the term "speaking", Spivak means a transaction between the speaker and listener. Subaltern talk, in her argument, does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance.

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